

The Mission on the Move Acts 13:1-13a

Introduction

A really big problem in the church today is the failure to get moving and getting things done

A common cause of this failure can of course be the problem of **procrastination** but some others are:

Inertia, where we've been settled so long that being stagnant has become normal

Comfort, where we don't want to have our secure little world disturbed

Laziness, where it's just too much of a bother to get busy

Or even **apathy**, where we just don't care whether the work gets done

But perhaps the most common cause of failing to move and carry out the mission of God is **uncertainty** where we simply don't know what God wants us to do or how he wants us to do it

And so we find ourselves caught in the trap I call the **paralysis of analysis** where we continue to think, talk, and even pray about what to do to the exclusion of actually doing anything

This uncertainty is largely caused by us having a wrong idea of how it is that God works to guide us and how God expects us to respond to his guidance

Far too often we find ourselves waiting for God to move us like a chess piece or to send an angel like we saw him do in the account of Peter being rescued from prison in **Acts 12** which we looked at last week

But God seldom interacts with us in such a **dramatic** way and seldom gives such **detailed** instructions

Our passage this morning is instructive as it provides us with clues as to how God leads and directs his children

And as we turn our attention to **chapter 13** we will see that it is a pivotal chapter in the history of the church

Beginning with chapter 13 the central character of Acts changes from Peter to Paul and from the activities in and around Jerusalem to the missionary activities emanating from Syrian Antioch and ministry to the Gentiles

In **Acts 1:8** Jesus said that his disciples would be his witnesses in "Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth"

And we have seen the first three of those fields being reached in the first 12 chapters of Acts

Now we will begin to see the deliberate, intentional spread of the gospel into the Gentile world – which is to say "the end of the earth"

Our passage this morning is **Acts 13:1-13a** and if you haven't joined me there already I encourage you to do so now

In these verses we will be looking at the beginning of what we know as Paul's first missionary journey

But in the details of this account we will see how God revealed his will to the church, how they handled the details surrounding God's direction, and what work God's mission consisted of

Taking your note sheet our first main point will be **How Should We Expect God to Direct Us?**

The second main point will be **How Should We Deal With the Details?**

And the third main point will be **How Should We Recognize God's Work ?**

Follow along as I read the first three verses of Acts 13 (Acts 13:1-3)

As we consider this part of the passage we will be seeking to answer the following two questions:

First, how does God usually lead us into discovering his will and give us direction in life?

And second, who calls or places people into ministry?

1Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2While 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.” 3Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

I. How Should We Expect God to Direct Us?

This account begins in Antioch of Syria which was a cosmopolitan trade city on the Orontes River about 15 miles inland east of the Mediterranean Sea

We were first introduced to this Antioch in chapter 11 when the church sent Barnabas to investigate the news that a church had formed there and was showing success in converting a great number of people to the Lord

Syrian Antioch was also the place where the disciples were first called “Christians” as we saw in **Acts 11:26**

Church leaders in Antioch

Now in **verse 1** we see the names of five men who are listed as “prophets and teachers” in the church in Antioch

While it isn’t abundantly clear in our English translations, it seems that the Greek grammar in this list shows that the first three names on the list were the “prophets” and the last two names were the “teachers”

And it is widely accepted that the names are listed in order of their **seniority or prominence** within the church

As we look at the list we see the **ethnic and cultural diversity** of the city of Antioch reflected in the church leadership

Barnabas is listed first and we know that he was a Levite from Cyprus whose name was actually Joseph but was nicknamed Barnabas which means “son of encouragement” by the apostles

We first came across him in **Acts 4** when he sold a piece of land and donated the proceeds to help the needy

Next is **Simeon** “who was called Niger”

Niger means “black” and so it is widely speculated that Simeon was a dark-skinned man; possibly from Africa

And **Lucius** was most likely a Roman from North Africa

If these were the prophets then the teachers were:

Manaen who as a boy was raised alongside Herod the tetrarch as a foster brother or very close companion to him
Herod the tetrarch refers to Herod Antipas who was responsible for beheading John the Baptist and who played a key role in the trial of Jesus –

He was also the uncle to Herod Agrippa I who we read about beheading James and imprisoning Peter in chapter 12

And rounding out the list we see **Saul** who we know was a Pharisee from Tarsus in Cilicia in Southeast Asia Minor

Saul’s position

This was a diverse group for sure and it’s interesting to see Saul named last showing that he may well have been the junior member of this leadership team – especially given what we know of him and the influence he is going to have

But if we look back to **Acts 11:25** we see that Barnabas was in Antioch first and it was Barnabas who went to Tarsus to look for Saul to request his assistance with instructing the believers in Antioch because of the overwhelming growth the church was experiencing

And then in **Acts 11:26** we see that the two of them taught together for a year in Antioch

I didn’t mention it last week but the events of Acts 12 actually occurred in the gap between **Acts 11:30** where Barnabas and Saul took the offering to Jerusalem and their return to Antioch in **Acts 12:25**

And chapter 12 serves as a kind of interlude that allowed Luke to kind of wrap things up and to explain why Peter disappears from the narrative

So at this time Barnabas was still in senior position to Saul as is shown by the order of their names in the narrative

Worshipping and fasting

Now in **verse 2** we see what these leaders were doing when they received direction from the Holy Spirit

We read, “While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting”

The word, “worshipping” is sort of an unfortunate choice as it somewhat obscures the meaning of the Greek word behind it

We often find this when translating from one language to another as we rarely find single words that have all the precise meaning in two different languages

The Greek word here translated as “worshipping” means to serve – with an emphasis on *regular* or *formal* service

Other English translations use the word “ministering” or “serving” and when we put all the different translations together we begin to get a clearer understanding of what Luke means to convey here

Just as an aside, since most of us aren’t Greek and Hebrew scholars I recommend reading Scripture in several reputable English versions as the different English words chosen by various translators will help clarify the nuances that are often obscured in the translation process

I usually look at passages in at least 4 or 5 different versions when studying for this very reason

It’s not that any of the English words are wrong but that we can at times come to a wrong interpretation according to our own understanding of the English words used so a variety of words helps us avoid that error

So, looking at **verse 2** again we see that the leaders of the church were busy with God’s business – they were serving, ministering, and worshipping

They were actively working on behalf of God in the way that they knew God desired them to be

And I think that is a vitally important fact for us to see, understand, and accept

God’s usual way of leading is to give us further direction while we are already demonstrating obedience and ministering according to what we know

Far too many people in the church today act as if they need to cease all activity and just stand still and wait for God to move them in some earth-shattering, definitive way

But God rarely, if ever, works that way – that’s not to say he can’t but just that it doesn’t seem that he does

Most of the time God intervenes with new instruction as we are already busy exercising the gifts he has given us according to the opportunities he has already put before us

I know that has proven to be true in my own life

Some 20-odd years ago as a result of a sermon series on baptism, God convicted me that I needed to be baptized

And after I submitted in obedience to believer’s immersion God began to reveal to me that he wanted me to get involved in the work of the church

So I accepted the invitation to become a deacon and at some point substitute taught an adult Sunday school class which led to me teaching a kids class on a regular basis

At some point God made it clear that he wanted me to begin to prepare for further ministry so I took a couple of classes through Trinity’s extension program at Elmbrook Church up in Brookfield

Fast forwarding a bit God directed me to go to Moody and get my degree and begin to prepare for full-time ministry and during the course of those seven years he laid on my heart the desire to become a pastor and so on...

God’s leading in my life has been somewhat incremental but further revelation has always come as a result of obedience to what I already knew he wanted me to do

It’s far easier to steer a vehicle that is moving than it is one that is standing still

And in our passage we see that God chose men who were already working and he gave them further direction

The instruction

Notice in **verse 2** what the Holy Spirit said

“Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them”

To "set apart" means to take away, to separate, or to exclude – to remove someone from an association

The Holy Spirit basically told the church leaders to release Barnabas and Saul from their service in Antioch so that they could undertake the work that he had for them

In fact we see that the Holy Spirit had already called Barnabas and Saul to the work

Earlier when we looked at **Acts 9:15** we saw how Saul had been chosen “to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel”

We aren't told of Barnabas' personal call but apparently he too had been previously called to this work

And now we see that the time has come for those callings to begin to be fully realized

The church sent them

And in **verse 3** we see that the church fasted and prayed, laid hands on them as a sign of fellowship and support, and sent them off

This is the second mention of **fasting** in these three verses and while time won't permit us to fully explore the subject of fasting there are some things we need to understand

Fasting was common among the Jews and it was engaged in often as a means of focusing one's attention away from earthly matters and onto spiritual matters and it appears the believers continued the practice

There were several different types of fasts from partial fasting which was abstention from a specific food or forgoing a specific meal, to a regular fast where one abstained from all food but continued to drink water and maybe juice, to a full fast in which no food or drink was consumed for a time – people even occasionally fasted from certain activities

We don't know which of these fasts is in view here but I believe, at least with the second fast mentioned in our passage, that the whole church was involved in the fasting

So the whole church fasted and prayed to demonstrate their sincere desire to hear from God before they all laid hands on the two men as a bestowal of blessing and recognition of their call before sending them to the work

Balance

Clearly the call came from God – so when we ask who *calls* a person to ministry the answer is that God calls them

But here we see that the church also *sent* them which means that **the church confirmed the call and gave their support and blessing to their ministry**

It seems that the leaders sensed the command of the Holy Spirit and then the church lent their submission to it and showed their support of it by asking God to bless the endeavor as they released the men to it

We aren't told exactly how the Holy Spirit communicated to the leaders and then the church as a whole but,

In my experience, the leading of the Holy Spirit has generally come as a sense of agreement amongst godly men and women as they lived close to God through working, praying and regularly seeking God's heart

And in the course of doing so unanimity of direction was clearly sensed and determined to be God's leading

And in this account, what we see illustrated for us is a **balance between the two common errors – too much individualism** where people go and do as they please without seeking godly counsel and **too much institutionalism** where nothing can be done without it being initiated, investigated, and planned by a group

The pattern for the church then is that God calls to ministry and the church confirms and supports the call

II. How Should We Deal With the Details?

Look with me now at **verses 4-6a** where we will see **some of the details** of their going

4So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. **5**When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. **6**When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos...

Again, we see that they were sent out by the Holy Spirit – and obviously, the purpose was to minister to the Gentiles

Clearly it was God who sent them and for a purpose but like God's call to Abram their destination isn't specified

So, how did Barnabas and Saul decide to go down to Seleucia and then sail to Cyprus?

And why did they take John Mark with them?

The Holy Spirit hadn't given any indication that anyone else was to go with Barnabas and Saul

What our passage shows us here is that ministry is often a combination of the clear direction of the Holy Spirit and the logical reasoning of man – a mixture of God's sovereignty and human responsibility

Far too often in the church we refuse to move unless we feel that God has clearly communicated every detail to us

But in the account before us there was no master ministry plan developed

They didn't do an in depth needs assessment and analyze their chances of success

No, they headed to the nearest port city where they could catch a ship and headed to Cyprus to get busy witnessing

And as we consider their choice, Cyprus seems to be a logical place to head because Barnabas was from Cyprus

He likely had good contacts there and was undoubtedly familiar with the territory, customs, and so forth

It simply made logical sense when given the command to go with no particular destination specified; to go someplace that was known to the leader of the team

Now, that's not to say that the Holy Spirit played no part in guiding them as we know they were sent by the Holy Spirit and they were committed to doing what God wanted them to do so they were in all likelihood influenced by the Holy Spirit in making their choice even though they weren't specifically directed

Application

And that's the way it often works for us – actually, it's the way it most likely is going to work for us

You or I or we will get the clear sense that God wants us to take on a project, or a ministry, or he may put some need on our heart and we truly feel God leading us to do something about it – to take it on

But maybe we don't know precisely how God would have us begin – the step-by-step instructions are missing

So what do we do?

Sadly, in those situations we often have the tendency to stop and wait – to procrastinate so as to avoid making a mistake

When what we should do is to pick the direction that seems to be the most logical or the most favorable and trust that God will bless the path for us or redirect us in order to see his will is done

Psalms 119:60 says: I hasten and do not delay to keep your commandments.

It's been said that delayed obedience is disobedience and we need to admit that there are times when we try to camouflage our disobedience with spirituality by endlessly praying and studying and talking about what we really, in our heart of hearts, know we should be doing right now

It's truly a shame when we pray an opportunity into obsolescence—but we all know we do it sometimes

To the Jews first

As will later become the pattern of Paul's ministry the team first went to the synagogues and preached to the Jews

Again, this made some amount of logical sense as they themselves were Jews and would want to go to see their fellow Jews

But also, the synagogues are where they would stand a chance of finding Gentile proselytes who would be open to the message of the gospel

And they would have stood little to no chance of getting a Jewish audience had they first gone to the Gentiles

But even more important to their decision to go the Jews first is the fact that Paul reveals in **Romans 1:16** that it was God's intention that the gospel go to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles

So having travelled the 15 miles from Antioch to Seleucia and then taken the 100 mile voyage to Salamis on Cyprus they proceeded to travel the length of the island another 100 miles overland to the city of Paphos

I find it interesting that Luke doesn't include any details of their trip across Cyprus

No doubt they ministered in the cities and towns that they passed though because that was why they were there

But Luke waits until they reach Paphos clear over on the other coast to share the account of Sergius Paulus and Bar-Jesus, also known as Elymas

And in this account we are informed as to what constitutes **the work** of the church in spreading the gospel

III. How Should We Recognize God's Work?

Let's read through the account in verses 6-13a

6When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. **7**He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. **8**But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. **9**But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him **10**and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? **11**And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. **12**Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. **13**Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia.

Paphos was, and still is, a city with a good natural harbor on the western coast of Cyprus

Known for its worship of Venus, the goddess of sexual love, Paphos was also known for its immorality

We can assume that the missionary trio kept their same routine of going to the synagogues and preaching the gospel

Then, at some point, the Roman proconsul, Sergius Paulus, summoned them and sought to hear the Word of God

And when they went they also met the magician or sorcerer, Bar-Jesus who was also known as Elymas

Bar-Jesus means "son of Jesus" and it appears that he was trading on the name of Jesus to peddle his false religion

So Elymas which in Greek means "magician" opposed the gospel message that Barnabas and Saul were teaching

And Luke even includes Elymas' intention saying that he was "seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith"

How many times have people repeated the actions and intentions of Elymas since that day?

Some of the most dangerous cults ever known claim just enough of Jesus to draw people in as they lead them astray

The gospel message is simple and plain; Paul refers to it as the "straight paths of the Lord" and there are many like Elymas who continue to make the straight path crooked as they twist it into something else altogether

The Word of God

The first thing we need to note about the work of Barnabas and Saul which also remains an identifying element of our work today is that **it involves preaching, teaching, and sharing the Word of God**

Sergius Paulus was interested in the Word of God and asked Barnabas and Saul to share it with him

The Word of God alone has the power to save

Again, we see this truth expounded in **Romans 1:16** where Paul writes:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for **it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes**

You know, there are many different ways to evangelize

In the prologue to Warren Wiersbe's book Be Dynamic Ken Baugh lists **four tools of evangelism**:

Service Evangelism – where we do acts of service in Jesus' name as we openly share the person and work of Jesus

Lifestyle Evangelism – where we serve as light in our dark world and show forth Jesus to others by our behavior

Friendship Evangelism – where we develop friendships and closeness with the lost to show them Jesus

Confrontational Evangelism – where we openly confront and speak forth the Word even to strangers

But each of those approaches requires that God's Word be included

Otherwise, they could just as easily be used to convert people to cheer for our favorite sports team, to join our club, to agree with our political ideology, to buy a product, or most anything else we might want to persuade people to do

What makes the work we do the work of God is the inclusion of the Word of God

Opposition

Then we need to recognize the second factor that identifies the work of God is that we *will* face **opposition**

Satan does not want us to succeed in sharing the gospel and he will do all he can to hinder our efforts to do so

In fact, opposition is a pretty sure way of knowing that we're on the right track

Satan sent Elymas to oppose Barnabas and Saul and how Saul responded to the situation is instructive for us when we face opposition in doing God's work

We must stand up to opposition and oppose it right back by calling it what it is

I think we would agree that Saul wasn't exactly soft and gentle in his response to Elymas

I'm glad that Scripture records that the words that came from Saul's mouth were uttered while he was filled with the Holy Spirit otherwise we could be excused for wondering if he was just a bit out of line

Saul calls Elymas out in the strongest of terms:

"You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?"

And then he pronounced that the Lord was going to temporarily blind Elymas because of his heresy

The fact that Elymas was blinded is somewhat ironic when we remember that Saul himself was blinded by the Lord while on the road to Damascus as he was headed to ravage any believers he found there

Of course we know that Saul repented and accepted Christ as a result but sadly we have no indication that Elymas did likewise

While we aren't supposed to go around pronouncing blindness on those who oppose us it seems clear that we are to boldly and strongly stand up to opposition to the gospel

And I want to be sure to point out that Sergius Paulus believed unto salvation as a result of the ministry of Barnabas and Saul

To be sure he was impressed by the blindness of Elymas and Paul's obvious courage, boldness, and conviction in presenting and defending the gospel message

But Luke is quick to point out that it was **the clear teaching of the Word** that saved him not the miracle

Saul becomes Paul the apostle

Of all the accounts that Luke could have shared from their time on the island of Cyprus we can't help but wonder why he included this particular one

I think it's because this is where Saul the Pharisee turned believer became the apostle Paul

Saul had been called to be an apostle but had not been empowered to exercise apostolic authority until he confronted Elymas

His pronouncement against Elymas is reminiscent of Peter's judgment against Ananias and Sapphira in **Acts 5**

Notice how up to this point the team has been referred to as Barnabas and Saul who took John Mark along to help

Now in **verse 13** we see that it is "Paul and his companions" that set sail from Paphos

The mantle of leadership has been passed from Barnabas to Paul and Paul will be the central character in the remainder of the book of Acts

Conclusion

The themes we see in this passage of being on the move, preaching the Word, and facing opposition will be repeated again and again in the remainder of the book of Acts

And those themes are still being repeated today because the mission of the church hasn't changed and neither have the tactics of the enemy

We know that our job is to be about the business of making disciples and being the Lord's witnesses to all –

That is to say we are to be engaged in carrying on the mission that Jesus began while he was on the earth

That's God's general will for us as the church today as we relate to the world around us

And as we are busy in carrying out that mission God will reveal his specific will within his general will

But in order to receive it we must be actively serving, worshipping, ministering according to what we already know

And we need to be able to commit in advance that we will do what God reveals

You know, there is a false idea in the church that God's will is somehow linear and that if we deviate from it at all we will spoil it – so we dare not make any kind of hasty move that might be a mistake

But I believe that God has given us a great deal of latitude to use our God-given minds, logic, and reason to look around at our circumstances to determine what we think is a reasonable path within his will and act on it

I believe we must be active and pro-active in carrying out our mission and stop worrying so much about possibly making a mistake because if we are acting from the basis of walking closely with God any "mistakes" we make will most likely be minor and easily correctable

Because I believe that God will either bless our activity or redirect us in order to fine-tune our activities to more fully conform to his will as long as we are careful to stay close to God through the regular study of his Word and prayer

We are going to see that action and movement will define Paul's pattern in his ministry as we proceed through the rest of Acts

Then we need to be prepared to face opposition because if we are faithful to the work of the church we will have opposition

Just as we cannot allow ourselves to be paralyzed by analysis neither can we remain on the sidelines because we fear opposition

The battle belongs to the Lord and ultimate victory is assured but we still need to be faithful to carry out our mission

So, as Steve Valentine is always saying,

Be sure you are studied up, prayed up, and rested up because you will face opposition

But also be sure that you are doing those things so that you are fueled up so that you can be actively even boldly moving the mission forward

Let's pray