

Sermon File # 910

Scripture Text: Acts 13:1-3

Sermon Title: *A Missionary Church*

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A Missionary Church

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to *The Book of Acts*, chapter 13, verses 1-3. Today, after our summertime series from *The Psalms*, we return to our journey through *The Acts of the Apostles*, which we have noted could better be called “The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus through His Spirit-filled Church.”

The Great Commission of Jesus to disciples in Acts 1:8 serves as Luke’s outline to his second volume, his *Acts of the Apostles*. Jesus promised his followers that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit would come upon them, as he did on the Day of Pentecost. Also, he said that they would be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” In the first 12 chapters of Acts, we noted how the church carried the message of the risen Lord Jesus to Jerusalem, and through the evangelism of men like Philip and Peter, the good news was taken beyond the confines of Judaism to “God-fearers, those on the margins of Judaism in Judea and Samaria. Through the church in Antioch, even total Gentile pagans in Samaria were being evangelized (11:19-30). Because of their evangelistic and missionary spirit, the Antioch

church began to replace the church in Jerusalem as the key strategic church for the advancement of the gospel.

What we will note today is a watershed moment in the life of the first century church, when the reach of the message of Jesus was poised to go “to the ends of the earth.” This would take place through the obedience of the church in Antioch, which serves as a model for a missionary church.

Follow as I read **Acts 13:1-3**.

The more I reflect on the setting of the church in Antioch of ancient Syria the more I realize its similarity to our environment here at IBC Brussels. Antioch was a key city, both commercially and politically, an important crossroads for commerce and government. It was a cosmopolitan, multi-cultural and multi-lingual city, but also a city with a very pagan worldview. Although its paganism was pre-Christian, ours in Western Europe, though post-Christian, is just as ungodly. The church realized it was a small voice standing up against the loud noises of a powerful occupying government and the sirens of a pagan variety of spiritualism and gods and goddesses worship.

Although the surrounding culture was so ungodly and inimical to the message of a risen crucified Savior, the church in Antioch was rooted deeply in worship of and obedience to their Lord, whom they trusted was sovereign over all and who held them under his mandate. That mandate upon them was to take the message of his salvation, not just to their city, but to the ends of the earth. They were obviously a people intent on listening to the voice of God and joining him in his kingdom activity.

As your pastor, I have a responsibility to be your servant leader as we too seek to know the heart of God and to follow him in the mission he has for us. Simply, that mission is to join him as he continues what he began to do with his incarnation, cross and resurrection—to transform lives and bring his kingdom reign to earth as it exists in heaven.

Let’s look together at this first-century church in Antioch as we seek to understand what’s involved in being a missionary church. We will note that a missionary church, like the Antioch church, is first of all...

➤ **A serving church**

A key word in our text is the word “worshiping” in verse 2. It’s from the Greek leitourgeo, meaning “to worship” or “to serve.” This word was used throughout the Greek translation of the Old Testament (*LXX*) to describe the service of the priests in the temple, whose work and service focused on worship (See Darrell L Bock, *Acts: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, page 439).

Instead of thinking of “church” as a place to be served, or even to be entertained, these Antiochean believers were part of a body of believers who were following the example of their Master, who “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). They were following Jesus...

- *Through disciple-making*

In verse one we read the listing of prophets and teachers. Here “prophet” can mean one who foretells the future through inspired ecstatic utterances or one who forth-tells the word of God through proclamation. And teachers were those who instilled the truth of Scripture (the Old Testament) and also related the oral tradition of the gospel accounts about Jesus. These men were gifted for and tasked with the responsibility of fulfilling Jesus’ command to make disciples and equip these disciples for works of service (Matthew 28:19f; Ephesians 4:11f).

These who were preachers and teachers represented a cultural cross-section, as diverse as the congregation itself. Their names show that some were Greek, others Jewish, from different parts of the world, including a black North African (Simeon called Niger, verse 1). They also represented the broad social-economic scale. Barnabas we know was a land-owner (4:36f), and Manaen was brought up with high social standing as a child-hood companion of one who was to become king, Herod Antipas (See John B Polhill, *Acts: an Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, page 289).

Here at IBC we too have a congregation consisting of people from some 40 different nations, and representing various walks of life. Although we have some in places of governmental and business influence on a world-wide scale, most of us are perhaps what Paul would deem “the weaker” element of society, through which God’s power might be seen more clearly (1 Corinthians 1:26ff). But just as with the church in Antioch, God’s strategy is to have his people in all walks of life and all levels of society, where he is at work to give his witness and draw people to himself. As pastor-teachers and elders, our calling is to teach and equip God’s people to become disciples and disciple makers, those who are learning as we follow Jesus and then bringing to Jesus those in our spheres of influence.

Effective disciples are followers of Jesus who daily are becoming more like him. As we noted earlier this year in the sermon from Acts 11, “The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch” (See in IBC Web site, archived sermon, from Acts 11:19-30, “How We Got the Name ‘Christian,’” preached on June 8, 2008). They were given that “nickname” because of their similarity of character to Jesus Christ. And we too are being transformed into his likeness, from one degree of his image to the next (2 Corinthians 3:18), and apart from that inner transformation and likeness our witness for Christ is empty, futile and unfruitful.

God wants us to be equipped and to equip others for works of service...

- *Through worship*

This *leiturgia* is a comprehensive term, basically meaning all that God is doing through his people to bring glory to himself. There is of course the service of worship, whereby we focus on the greatness and glory of God. Worship is the underlying purpose of life, the magnifying of God as Creator and Savior. God's purpose is that he might be glorified and honored by all that he has made, and he has suited us, who are created in his image, most perfectly for this task. We are most human when we are in our place, in the presence of God, worshipping him.

This was the reason for Jesus' incarnation, to come to the world to make possible the restoration of wayward humankind to our rightful place as worshipers of God. This is what Jesus told the Samaritan woman, that the Father is seeking worshipers (John 4:23). The church in Antioch was a worshipping church, and their mission was to seek to draw pagans in their city into a relationship with God, so that, like the woman at the well, they too might be transformed into worshipers.

And this was and is still God's strategy for reaching lost pagans—not by watering down worship to make it acceptable entertainment for seekers, but to make pagans into disciples, learning followers of Jesus, who know want to worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). The ministries of missions, evangelism and disciple-making are the means to the end of making worshipers, and the reason we evangelize is to recruit worshipers, who will join us around the throne—people from every nation, tribe, people group and language (Revelation 7:9). Evangelism is part of our service, our worship. And God is calling us to engage in relating to a lost world, which first of all needs to see Christ *in* us before they will listen to the message of Christ *from* us. And, when they are drawn to Christ and experience his grace, they are made into worshipers, who, along with us acknowledge the “worth-ship” of God (a word that originated with the Old English word “weorthscipe.” See *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* on “worship”).

We have some God-honored methods of outreach, which he seems to be using effectively, such as our English and Alpha classes and our women's outreach programs. Just this past week I answered the phone at the church office and was asked by a local fireman about how he and his colleagues could sign up for our English classes. He had heard about them from some policemen who had been in our classes. God has given us effective outreach methods, but methods alone won't work without the power of the Spirit at work in obedient lives.

A truly missionary church doesn't depend on activities and methods alone. Notice, when our text describes the worship activity of this church it says their worship was...

✓ Intensified by fasting

Fasting is mentioned twice in this brief text, which leads me to think that it was an important part of the life of this missionary church! In my Baptist tradition, we have done much more feasting than fasting, and perhaps for that reason we have forfeited some spiritual power that comes when we intensify our worship and praying by refraining from the self-indulgence that accompanies normal, everyday life.

Of course, as with any spiritual discipline, the practice of fasting can become legalistic and a matter of spiritual pride (See Jesus' warning in Matthew 6:16-18). Scripture doesn't give us a lot of information or directives about fasting, but we can assume it involves some degree of self-denial of our normal physical appetites and activities, in order to focus on prayer and worship. When we have gone a while without food, having missed a few meals, we do have a keener alertness and ability to focus on spiritual thoughts, prayer and meditation.

For that reason, I fully support our Prayer Team Leader, Ronnellie Van der Merwe, who suggests that we fast during our monthly 24-hour prayer chains. Abstinence from food usually accompanies a fast, but for health reasons some may not be able to go for lengthy periods without eating at least minimal amounts. There are other things we can and possibly should include in our day or possibly days of fasting, such as abstinence from entertainment and the Internet and/or anything that would distract us from our focus and meditation upon God and his word. (I know that my fast during my prayer time this morning included my refraining from reading all the college football [US] scores on the Internet!)

Whatever we don't know regarding the details of fasting, we do know it's for the sole purpose of increasing our spiritual fervor and intensity, so that, like the church in Antioch, we might hear from God and discern together what he is saying to us. Intense worship focuses on the presence of holy God and makes us aware of his glorious presence. Our singing, Scripture reading, preaching and listening are done with a sense of awe in his glorious presence and a corporate sense of joy and celebration before him.

In my home country churches have been engaged in what have been dubbed "worship wars," which is an oxymoronic term. When we truly worship, there is no place for or inclination toward warring factionalism over what style of music is used in the service of worship. We are gathered, not for our pleasure and entertainment, but to honor and please the Lord and to celebrate his presence and to hear a word from him.

Today we are privileged to have as a guest Ms Susan Stroschein, who, along with our IBC missionary, Ken Tucker, leads a worship ministry in Romania called

Jubilate. What a privilege it was for me to share during their summer conference this year and to experience worship with about 100 worship leaders from all over Romania and Moldova! Those people seem to understand the heart of worship and are free to express and lead worship in all sorts of musical styles because their focus is upon glorifying and addressing God in worship, instead of particular musical tastes.

I believe that the worship intensity in Romania was strengthened during the years of their struggle for survival against Communist oppression. In Scripture, the people of God fasted and sought the Lord God with intensity during times of national emergency. (As Ajith Fernando says, fasting gives evidence of an “atmosphere of urgent desire” in the church. See *Acts: The NIV Application Commentary*, page 374). The church in Antioch realized their desperate dependence on God and expressed their desperation for God through fasting. As we all well know, we’re in a nearly world-wide financial crisis. The US Congress met in emergency session this past week to try to address the crisis in banks and other financial institutions to try to avert another Great Depression. Possibly, this emergency caused them to rearrange priorities. We will learn to worship, serve, witness and pray with intensity when we realize our desperate need for God

In a similar way, we need to enter the house of the Lord here at IBC and seek to worship him with intensity of our desperate need for him and our reverence for him and also with great joy and expectancy, believing that the risen Lord is here to meet with us as we fall down before and draw near to him. All that we say and do should be done as before him, offering our very best to him and expecting that we will leave this place of worship as changed people, transformed by the very presence of the Lord. In the context, the environment of that kind of worship we will also be...

✓ Empowered by prayer

It was because of prayer that the church at Antioch was able to be a serving church, gathered for intense fellowship, but also a sending church, ready and willing to join God in his mission to the world. They didn’t just say prayers, but rather they prayed with intensity fueled by their fasting and focus on the presence and the promises of the risen Lord.

In a similar way, to be God’s missionary church we too must be a people of both personal and corporate prayer. What will make our prayer meetings and worship prayer times powerful and effective is by God’s people growing in personal prayer power and intimacy with God. When James writes about the power of the prayers of the elders of the church he assumes that those praying corporately and in small groups are holy people, people made holy through prayerful living in intimacy with God. He reminds us: “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5:16).

Prayer is simply our calling upon and acknowledging our absolute dependence upon God. Everyone in the church shares a responsibility for this great work. As one saint has said, we don't pray in order to do the work of the Lord; rather, prayer *is* the work of the Lord.

A church that serves through worship, disciple-making, witness and service of any kind is the kind of church that becomes...

➤ **A sending church**

A serving church is a church prepared to hear from God and to join him in his mission. Because this congregation in Antioch was sincerely and intensely worshiping, teaching and serving, they were ready to send others out on mission to the rest of the world. A sending church, as can see, is one that is...

- *Listening to the Holy Spirit*

As the people drew near to God in worship and prayer they heard God's call. Our text says that "the Holy Spirit said" (verse 2). The Holy Spirit speaks to a listening people, to those who desire to hear from him in order to join him in his work. It's a given that the risen Lord Jesus is at work around us and that he desires that we join him. The question is, are we in a position to hear him when he speaks and when he calls us or are we too involved in speaking and too busy with activities to hear his voice.

I believe that it's in the context of this intense prayer and worship that God speaks to our hearts. He speaks today through his word, to which we must give our concerted attention. Obviously, there are truths and principles that are clearly expressed in Scripture and we must obey and follow the obvious, such as his directives for godliness and an obedient and fruitful life of service.

But God speaks to us also as we share together and find his direction through a unified sense of his presence and leading. Following our church members' meeting last Sunday, as a good example, the other elders and I noted how we sense God's hand upon our discussion about some important decisions pertaining to our finances and our roof project. I believe that the Holy Spirit spoke to us about the steps we are to take. God cares very much about this church and our resources, including the building, and as we depend on and wait upon him, he will lead us in the right way.

And the way the Holy Spirit will lead the church is the same way he leads individuals who are his disciples—the way of the cross. God blesses the church, not in order for it build itself up in institutional power and influence, but rather to be a blessing to the world. As Darrell Bock says, "God loves churches that look

beyond their own needs.” We today can be grateful that the church in Antioch didn’t focus only on themselves, but had a focus on the world. Where would the church be today if they hadn’t supported Paul in his missionary ventures? (See page 440, above citation).

We must listen to and obey the Holy Spirit, who will lead us infallibly. And that goes for everything the church is called to be and do. As a missionary church, listening to the Holy Spirit will lead to our...

- *Setting apart the called*

IBC Brussels has done this perhaps as much as any church of our size. God has called out from us those he has set apart for the mission fields of the world. We know that each one of us is called to be a child of God. The Scripture calls every one of God’s children a “saint,” one set apart to be holy (Paul said this even of the particularly troubled and “fleshly” church people in Corinth. See 1 Corinthians 1:2).

Like the church in Antioch, we are called to be Christ-like followers of Jesus and also members of the Body of Christ. We are set apart for a life of holiness and service, and are gifted to do our part in edifying, building and encouraging, the Body of Christ. And we are to acknowledge that Christ calls some to be set apart by the church for leadership. Of course, the five mentioned as teachers and preachers in Antioch were gifted for leadership, in order to equip all of the saints for works of service (Ephesians 4:11f). Under the leading of the Holy Spirit Antioch’s church set two of the most gifted apart and then we see them...

- *Sending out the called*

Again, in the context of prayer and fasting, the church sent these two, Paul and Barnabas, on mission. This tells us that this church was willing to release for mission their two most gifted leaders. (And Barnabas was a serious giver! See 4:36f) As NT Wright says, to lose these two leaders who had been their principle teachers (11:25f) must have been a serious blow to the church. But they had no other choice than to obey the Holy Spirit (See *Acts for Everyone, Part Two, Chapters 13-28*, page 3).

Just as is true for the individual Christian, so with the church. God calls us to a life of sacrifice, and when we give to him sacrificially we experience the miraculous law of the harvest. When we give he gives to us so that we can continue to give to him (2 Corinthians 9:6ff; Galatians 6:9). I believe God honors the mission giving and mission sending of a church, just as he does of the individual believer.

Of course, IBC regularly sends away those who come to Belgium as part of the ex-pat community. They serve with us faithfully for five, three years, or even

less, then God calls them somewhere else. Often their lives are transformed by their experiences with the Lord and this church during their years here. And then they return to their home country, or perhaps go to another land where they serve as God's "sent ones," his missionaries. (I like the Dutch word for missionary, "zendeling," based on the verb "zenden," to send. Missionaries, apostles, are God's sent ones).

There is also the special missionary calling that people like Susan Stroschein have answered—those gifted and given extra grace to live and embrace another people, language and culture as God's ambassadors. I believe that God is in the business of sending out from our churches the very best of our young people and older people, in some cases, to use unique gifts in sharing the good news and planting new churches and doing great ministries where no one else can go.

Conclusion:

We here in IBC have a unique opportunity to be involved in a missionary church. In a real sense, we are all missionaries planted in a mission city, a strategic city like Antioch. Although Antioch was itself an international city and a "foreign mission field" in some ways, the church there didn't think that their mission field ended with themselves, but embraced the entire civilized world. They would have appreciated the quote of John Wesley, who in the 18th Century, during the Great Awakening, said "The world is my parish." Unfortunately, many churches and even many Christians reverse the words and say, "My parish is the world." In other words, I will take care of my needs and our church will care only for the maintenance of the institution and its property. In other words, "Our parish, our local church is all of the world that we care about," is what this attitude says.

It's sad to see many so miss the opportunity to be of vital service through faithful involvement in this church, IBC Brussels. My prayer is that more of us who are in Belgium as a result of a government assignment or a company transfer will realize that ultimately it was God who sent you here. And he sent you to Belgium as a part of his mission for your life. While you are here, as someone has said, you have the choice of being either a missionary or a mission field, either serving the Lord through his church or in need of God's people to bring you back into his kingdom service. Certainly you should seize opportunities to travel with your family while here, but none of us is on leave from kingdom service. God still demands our priority in worship and service, and we will never have a more unique opportunity to be involved in a missionary church, itself in a world mission field, than right here at IBC Brussels.

Today we have celebrated the baptism of five of our people, who thereby have declared their commitment to follow Jesus in newness of life. At the close of our worship service we will join in a commissioning prayer for God to empower them

as he sends them out on mission in their daily lives, into their unique sphere of influence, their mission field.

Each one of us must decide what it means for us to be a missionary Christian and a member of a missionary church. Do we believe that we are in this place at this time for a unique mission that only we can fulfill? There are relationships that only we can form and ministries that we alone, in our personal and particular locations, can perform. And we will be held accountable for our faithfulness with these unique opportunities, this unique stewardship. That also includes the ways we participate in the life of this church through prayer, giving and serving.

As we prepare to share Communion together, may we celebrate the presence of the crucified, risen Lord Jesus, who gave himself for us that we might die to self and live to and for him. May we also celebrate the fact that we are privileged to have a mystical union with so many people of diverse lands and cultures, whom God has brought together to be a vital part of his missionary church.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. From what you know about the city of Antioch and the church there, what similarities do you see with our city/church; your city/church?
2. How is a church's worship related to the way it serves?
3. How is our service a part of our worship?
4. What is the role of prayer in the life of the church? Would you say that our (your) church gives a priority to prayer?
5. Is fasting an important spiritual aid or discipline? What place does fasting have in your life? In the life of your church?
6. In what way(s) are you a missionary? Is there a special calling to the ministry/leadership gift of missionary, and what is the basis for your answer?
7. Pray for God to increase your missions understanding and heart and to make your church a greater missionary church.

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