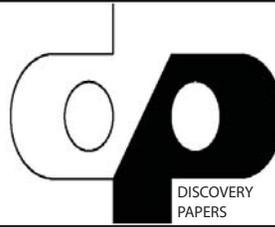


CALLED INTO SERVICE

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Acts 13:1-3
6th Message
Steve Zeisler
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Acts 13:1-3

Faith uncovers great truths that are otherwise hidden from view (Hebrews 11:1). We are in the midst of a topical sermon series in which the insights of faith are applied to different aspects of the Christian life. This message concerns our calling to be witnesses.

For more than sixty years, this congregation has gathered in God's presence facing the description of ourselves that is engraved on the wall behind me: "You are not your own—You are bought with a price." When I first arrived here (many years ago), I thought the declaration was both strange and confusing, but over time I have found it to be compelling.

The statement is taken from 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, a paragraph that is difficult to interpret. It is not warm or uplifting, taking us rather into the world of slaves and hostages who must be purchased. I've performed weddings in this auditorium in which a family member of the bride or groom thought the sentiment was unsuitable and expected it to be covered.

Yet, the auditorium engraving calls attention to two important truths. First, we are of immense importance to God. He paid an unthinkable price—the life of his son—to gain us for himself. Second, we have been purchased not for display as trophies or ornaments, but for lives of service. God redeemed us to serve him as light bearers in a dark world, as witnesses bearing a message of liberation.

We will examine our theme by studying a paragraph in Acts 13. First, however, some background. At the beginning of Acts Jesus said, "You are to be my witnesses, starting in Jerusalem and then in Judea and then in Samaria and then in the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:8). Witness was the essential calling of the newly established church. However, the nature of this calling changed as the arena for its expression expanded.

At first the disciples answered questions, explaining to astonished onlookers the nature of miracles and wonders that occurred in Jerusalem. These miracles were evidence that Jesus had been raised from the dead and was, in fact, the long awaited Messiah of Israel.

Eventually the witness-bearers expanded their mission to Judea and Samaria, though usually under compulsion (being persecuted), and often with reluctance. A new approach was inaugurated at a prayer meeting in the cosmopolitan city of Antioch in Syria. This meeting is described in the text chosen for this message:

Acts 13:1-3:

Now 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 worshipping 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 .

There are five men named who, apparently, are serving as the elders of the vibrant Antioch church. It appears that fasting and prayer were a regular part of their leadership gatherings and that on a particular occasion the Spirit spoke to them. Though reported in matter of fact terms, this scene should capture our imagination.

Looking back we realize that the mission on which Saul (later re-named Paul) and Barnabas are sent turned out to be a hinge point of history. For the first time missionaries journeyed with the positive intention of proclamation and church planting, not because they were persecuted. In this respect they became a model for all subsequent outward-bound mission enterprise.

In the near term, their experience of seeing Gentiles come to faith helped other Christians understand that Jesus was Savior of all, not just the Messiah of the Jews. Their work was a spark that became a blaze. The message that 'Jesus is Lord' eventually altered the nature of the Roman Empire and the course of world history. Bought with a price, God's servants became world-changing ambassadors.

Returning to Acts 13:1-3, what observations might help us understand our calling to be witnesses?

First we note that the church was overseen by a community of leaders, serving in a role similar to that of the apostles in Jerusalem. These men gave attention to the voice of the Spirit. Modern reliance on logistics, demographics, and technology in gospel proclamation has a place, but it should not be first place. Witness requires divine power, not just good technique. A church is best aligned to find the mind of the Lord when it is led by elders (plural) who are gifted and mature.

Second we note that the five men mentioned are all 'second generation' leaders. None of the twelve original apostles were present when the Spirit initiated what we now describe as the 'first missionary journey'. Yet, there was no hesitation to act absent explicit apostolic endorsement.

Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen ... and Saul had not followed Jesus before his death, and each man had a unique story of God's calling and God's faithfulness. Churches often struggle to give significant responsibility to a new generation of leaders, but the life experiences of these five men, meeting Christ far from Galilee and Jerusalem, shaped them for the barrier breaking choices that lay ahead.

In addition, we take note of Antioch as the location chosen for a new work of God. It was a cosmopolitan city with multiple languages, thriving international commerce, and a large university—a 'tossed salad' culturally, with residents from Egypt, Rome, Greece, Syria, and Judea.

Looking back to Acts 11,

Acts 11:19-20:

Those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word of the Lord to no one except Jews. ²⁰But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists.

Scholars debate whether Hellenists were Jews who had begun to live like Greeks, or Greeks with a deep interest in Judaism. In either case, they represented a middle ground in the Jew/Gentile divide.

The Jerusalem church was so steeped in traditional Judaism that it struggled at every stage to accept non-Jewish Christians as spiritual equals. Even Peter, who had received a special message from the Lord on the subject (Acts 10:9-16) had difficulty in this matter (see Gal. 2:11-12). Antioch was a melting pot and an ideal place for breaking down barriers. It was the right city for new wine to be poured into new wineskins.

Surely we live in an Antiochan part of the world. Silicon Valley has drawn residents from all over the globe. Its businesses, universities, worship centers, entertainments, and cuisines display vast human variety. I recently counted five different languages being spoken at the same time in the locker room of the gym where I work out. Faithful witness on our part requires crossing bridges from the familiar world to one that is unfamiliar. Yet we were purchased at great price for just this responsibility.

Who were the five men whose names are given to us in our text?

Barnabas is the most prominent of this group, having played an important role in the early days of the church. A Jew from Cyprus who was originally named Joseph, he acquired the nickname Barnabas, which means son of encouragement. His gift for building up others was important in making a place for the firebrand, Saul of Tarsus, and he surely was a blessing to the other leaders in the growing Antioch church.

Simeon who was called Niger. Niger is a form of the Latin word that means black. Simeon was, apparently, a black man with a Jewish name, suggesting that he had a unique journey of faith. *Lucius of Cyrene*. Cyrene is a region in North Africa on the Mediterranean, a place about which little else is known.

Manaen was raised in a bad neighborhood. Herod, a childhood companion, was the violent son of a wicked family, the man who beheaded John the Baptist. Yet now, despite this conflicted background, we find Manaen serving Christ's church. Finally, *Saul*. He began his career as a persecutor of Christians, yet he would eventually become the most influential follower of Jesus who ever lived.

We long to know more of these men and their journey to a place of service in Antioch. They were not chosen by God to lead the church because of sterling secular resumes or commanding personalities. All of them were gifted in the scriptures ('prophets and teachers'). They were not alike, yet were of one mind. They were worshippers who fasted and prayed together and heard the Spirit speak. They were qualified to take up *the work to which I have called them* (Acts 13:2) because of their gifts and their humble submissiveness to God.

The last phrase I would pull from our text is, *after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off* (Acts 13:3). I presume there were other arrangements made—tickets, passports, baggage, etc. But the most important preparation was the strengthening of heart that came from the prayers of

the Antioch church. Barnabas and Saul were headed into danger, leaving on God's errand with the hands-on blessing and support of a loving community.

Witness is still risky business. Our culture is morally chaotic and opposed to any notion of divine authority. Scientific advances race ahead of the wisdom required to prevent dangerous outcomes. Economic disparities and ancient hatreds cause violent clashes around the globe. Human pride and human desperation are evident everywhere. Yet, we have been bought at great cost in order to witness the good news of Jesus love into just such a world. May we be faithful to our calling.