

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

A Church That Overflows

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Acts 13:1-3

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 13.

Our passage this morning represents some significant milestones in the book of Acts. I want to help you to see these before we jump in. If you write notes in your Bible, these might be worth writing down in the margins.

Here, in chapter 13, the focus of the story officially shifts away from Peter. From here on out, we will be following the Apostle Paul in his missionary journeys. We first met Paul – also known by his Jewish name of Saul – in chapters 7-8 as he assisted with the murder of Stephen and then chased after the Christians to drag them to prison. Now, he is about to embark on a missionary assignment. As God so often does, he selected the most unlikely of candidates – Saul, the persecutor of the church – and transformed him into a powerful testimony of grace.

The story also shifts away from Jerusalem. From here on out, Antioch will represent the centre of Christian mission. Antioch – if you remember – was a city that was notorious for its depravity. It was sin city – the Las Vegas of the Mediterranean world. But – as God so often does – He chose to shine His light into this darkness and to grow a vibrant, missional community right next to the pleasure parks of Delphi.

Peter to Paul. Jerusalem to Antioch. Those significant shifts happen here, but dwarfing those transitions is one last detail: Acts 13 records the first account of a church sending out cross-cultural missionaries. As G. Campbell Morgan declares:

These three verses give the account of the beginning of the great missionary movement.¹

Up until this point, spread of the gospel and the mobilization of the church has largely been the result of persecution. Each time the tyrants struck, it was like they picked up a dandelion and blew; the seeds of the church spread everywhere, and this church in Antioch is evidence of that growth.

But that's difficult to replicate, isn't it? I don't think that Luke would have us walk away from chapters 1-12 desperately searching for a tyrant to chase us into the mission field. Here in chapter 13, however, we find an example of mission that can and should be replicated. Here we find a healthy church overflowing into the world. Look with me now to Acts 13. We will be reading verses 1-3. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

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. ² While 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." ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13:1-3 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In these three brief verses, we find a powerful example of what it looks like to be an overflow church. The story of the book of Acts – and the story of the Christian church throughout the ages – is a story of multiplication. It is a story of *outward* movement for the sake of those who have not heard. When I use the term "overflow church" I am referring to churches that have that outward thrust – churches that are clearly walking in obedience to the Great Commission:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the

¹ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 303.

Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18b-20 ESV)

Go. Make disciples. Baptize them. Teach them to obey. THAT is the mission that Jesus has entrusted to his church. We were ALL given this mandate, therefore, we should all be striving to become churches that can rightly be described as “overflow churches.”

But what does that look like in practice? If you’re anything like me, it’s helpful when those theological ideals are fleshed out in real-life examples. And that’s exactly what we have here. So, let’s consider this example and ask the question:

What Do We Learn Here About Overflow Churches?

The first lesson that we learn in this passage is that:

1. Overflow churches must first be healthy churches

I’m drawing this lesson from verse 1. There, we read:

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. (Acts 13:1 ESV)

You can’t overflow when your cup is empty. That’s true in life, and that’s true in the church. Dwindling dying churches do not replicate.

This church in Antioch was able to send out missionaries because they were healthy and well equipped. Luke lists five gifted leaders in this young congregation.

He begins the list with Barnabas. We’ve come to know and love Barnabas by now, haven’t we? He was a prominent leader in the church who was known particularly for his kindness. His name literally means “son of encouragement” and that’s how he lived his life. He was the first to embrace terrorist Saul when he came to the Lord and, when news reached Jerusalem about this move of the Spirit in the sin city of Antioch, Barnabas was the leader that was sent to assist the young congregation. We’re told of him:

for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. (Acts 11:24a ESV)

The gifts that God had given to Barnabas were instrumental in helping the diverse church in Antioch to walk in unity.

Speaking of diversity, the next leaders we find on the list are Simeon and Lucius. Simeon likely had dark skin because they referred to him affectionately as “Niger” – that’s simply the Latin word for black. Lucius was from Cyrene – a city from the North Africa. These leaders provide us with a glimpse of the beautiful diversity represented in this young church. Unfortunately, we don’t know much for certain about these men, except that these were included on this list next to wonderfully gifted men.

The fourth leader, Manaen, was a lifelong friend of Herod Antipas – the Herod that had John the Baptist beheaded. Imagine for a moment that a man got saved and became a member here at Redeemer and we later discovered that he was Prime Minister Trudeau’s good friend and that he served the government in an official capacity. A leader like that brings unique perspective to a congregation and likely opens a door for unique opportunities.

Fifth and finally, we meet Saul – who we know best as the Apostle Paul. He was a student under Gamaliel – the most well renowned Jewish rabbi. He was the smartest man in Antioch – and it wasn’t even close! That unrivaled intelligence went hand in hand with an insatiable work ethic. We often talk about the letters that Paul wrote, but we rarely talk about the physical undertaking of his missionary work. One commentator explains:

A conservative estimate of the distances that Paul covered during his missionary work between AD 32 - 65 indicates that he travelled at least 15,500 miles (25,000 km.), of which about 8,700 miles (14,000 km.) represent journeys by land, in all probability on foot.²

To put it succinctly, there was no one else like Paul.

² Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 549.

THIS was the leadership team of the first sending church! They had a fully stacked cupboard of leaders.

A lesson for us, then, is that if we want to be an overflow church for years to come, then leadership development must be part of our DNA. We need to take seriously the great commission call to make disciples.

Meaning – practically speaking – overflow churches are filled with moms and dads who spend intentional time in the word of God with their kids.

Overflow churches have a lineup of volunteers who are eager to teach the gospel to the next generation in Redeemer Kids.

Overflow churches have men and women who are mentoring and discipling the teenagers and young adults in the church.

Overflow churches are marked by authentic, Christian relationships where the Word of God is regularly discussed, prayers are regularly lifted up, and exhortations are regularly given.

Overflow churches intentionally develop teachers and preachers.

And overflow churches will run programs to further that end. But I hope you can see that the programs are just a piece. Real health cannot simply be plugged into the yearly church calendar. Real health comes from a community of disciple makers intentionally investing in one another.

Churches like that will naturally raise up leaders like the ones that we see here in Acts 13. And churches like the one we see here will naturally overflow. Overflow churches must first be healthy churches.

Next, we see that:

2. Overflow churches must first be Spirit-led churches

We see this in verse 2:

While 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.” (Acts 13:2 ESV)

Now, the text doesn't tell us exactly how the Holy Spirit spoke to this church. It could have been a voice from heaven, or a dream, or a vision, but I suspect it was probably a prophetic word from someone in the gathering. That detail doesn't really seem to matter to Luke. What he wants us to see is that the real animating force behind this mission was not actually the church. It was the Holy Spirit. One commentator explains:

While in human terms the church in Antioch is the "sending agency" of Barnabas and Saul, in theological terms it is the Holy Spirit who sets apart, calls, commissions, and empowers the two missionaries.³

But that prompts an important question: How does a church follow the Holy Spirit?

Simply put: A church that wants to be led by the Holy Spirit will adopt a *listening posture*.

Let me explain what I mean: Humanly speaking, you're more inclined to share important information with a person who is leaning in close with a pen and a notebook on hand than you are with a guy who won't take off his noise-cancelling headphones. Right? Well, similarly, God speaks to people who are leaning in and listening closely. God says:

But this is the one to whom I will look:
he who is humble and contrite in spirit
and trembles at my word. (Isaiah 66:2 ESV)

We see this listening posture in this church in Antioch. In our passage this morning, we find a church at prayer. If we want to be led by the Holy Spirit, prayer strikes me as an appropriate place to start. Humanly speaking, any married person will tell you that a healthy relationship is impossible without communication. We set apart intentional time to talk, to listen, to plan and to dream. Similarly, a church can become busy with all sorts of wonderful things, but if she never

³ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 555.

sets apart time to sit quietly and to commune with God in prayer, then how will she follow His leading?

That posture of listening is also evident in the fact that they were fasting. When we fast, we forego our physical needs for a season to demonstrate that we need Him more than anything. Fasting in the Bible is presented as a way of *heightening* and *amplifying* your prayer life. It is roughly equivalent to cupping your hands around your ears as you listen.

And of course, this church adopted a posture of listening as they sought God's will in His word. This church was worshipping, and we've seen already in Acts that their worship gatherings included preaching and teaching. A church that wants to be led by the Spirit will return to the word of God regularly and expectantly. With humility and contrition, they will tremble at the Word of God and obey all that it declares.

Before we move on, I want to make one last observation that we don't necessarily see in this passage but that is true nonetheless. If we want to be led by the Spirit – if we want to adopt a posture of listening – then we need to let go of our sin. In Psalm 66:18 we read:

If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened. (Psalm 66:18 ESV)

How can a church pretend to ask God for guidance in mission when she ignores His guidance in holiness? If we are harboring grudges, indulging in worldliness, mistreating our spouses and neglecting the poor then how we can possibly pretend to seek God for direction? He has already given His direction, and it was ignored!

Overflow churches are first Spirit-led churches. Through prayer, fasting, study of the word and repentance, they adopt a posture of listening.

Next, we see here that:

3. Overflow churches must first be generous churches

Take a moment and flip back to the end of chapter 12. Verse 25 says:

And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark. (Acts 12:25 ESV)

If you can remember back to chapter 11, Barnabas and Saul had been sent by the church in Antioch with a monetary gift to support the church in Jerusalem. This young, fledgling church had received word that a famine was coming – a famine that would affect them as well – and they chose to send their two most gifted leaders with a significant offering to help their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. These were generous, self-sacrificing people!

Well, at the end of chapter 12, Barnabas and Saul return from their long trip to Jerusalem. No offence to Simeon, Lucius or Manaen, but I suspect this church was pretty excited to sit under Paul’s teaching again and to enjoy the pastoral care that Barnabas provided. The team was finally back to full strength!

But then, we read:

While 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.” (Acts 13:2 ESV)

They just got the dream team back together! And now, God would have them send out their two strongest leaders indefinitely? This was an enormous ask! And yet, we read:

Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and **sent them off**. (Acts 13:3 ESV)

The word that the ESV translates here as “sent them off” is typically translated as “to set free” or “to release⁴” and I think that language better captures what we see here. The truth is, the church couldn’t “send” Paul and Barnabas, because Paul and Barnabas weren’t *theirs* to send. They belonged to the Lord. They had been gifted to the church in Antioch for a season. But now, God had a new assignment for them, and the church needed to *release* the leaders that they loved.

⁴ ἀπολύω entry in BDAG, s.v. “A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature — THIRD EDITION — (BDAG),” paragraph 1.

I felt convicted by this. In fact, this example flies in the face of everything that my natural impulses want. This passage commends the church in Antioch for their willingness to release gifted people, but don't we instinctively do the opposite? We want to hoard, and to accumulate, and to make our own lives as comfortable as possible.

Overflow churches are givers, not takers.

I suspect that this is going to be a real challenge for us. Not just because human beings are naturally selfish but because, starting as we did as a church plant out of Cornerstone, our whole history is a history of taking! We received financial support, leadership training, elders, teachers, prayer, and an inestimable amount more from Cornerstone over the last 11 years.

And to be clear, there was nothing wrong with that for a season. Young churches need help and support and – praise God – we received that in spades! This church in Antioch – this overflow church – also had to go through a season of receiving. Just a few weeks ago we read the story in chapter 11 of how the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch to provide support for the infant church. And Barnabas went to Tarsus and brought Paul down for further support.

Antioch's early days were "taking" days. But, as the Lord raised up new leaders, He called upon this church to become "givers."

Brothers and sisters, it appears to me that we are about to experience that same transition from "takers" to "givers." God is preparing us to be an overflow church, but that will require radical generosity.

Fourth and finally:

4. Overflow churches must first be worshipful churches

Look one more time at verse 2:

While 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.” (Acts 13:2 ESV)

This first missionary assignment was birthed out of a time of corporate worship. It was as they gathered together and proclaimed the glory and the wonder and the majesty of God that they were moved to send out their best on global mission. John Piper argues:

Therefore, worship is the goal and the fuel of missions: Missions exists because worship doesn't.⁵

Listen: It is our LOVE for God and our conviction that He deserves the praise of ALL THE NATIONS that fuels our mission. As this church in Antioch worshipped the Lord, and as He called them to send their beloved brothers across the sea to Cyprus, they were *eager* to do so because Jesus was not being worshiping in Cyprus yet. If releasing their two best leaders would lead to more praise for Jesus, then that was a NO BRAINER! They laid hands on them, and then they released them so that the worship could spread.

Missional churches are fuelled by worship!

It's important for us to see that because we will be tempted to fuel mission with other things.

We'll be tempted to fuel mission with guilt. “I guess we're *supposed* to send resources to our partners. If we *have to* release this leader, we will. We can't be the church the doesn't care about missions, *right?*” Guilt cannot sustain this mission.

Neither can pride. “Look at how big OUR missions line is! Look at how many churches WE planted! Nobody does missions like US!” Excitement for growing your “brand” will never sustain mission.

⁵ John Piper, from the sermon *Missions Exists Because Worship Doesn't* preached at Bethlehem Baptist Church on October 27, 2012. Manuscript accessed from <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/missions-exists-because-worship-doesnt-a-bethlehem-legacy-inherited-and-bequeathed> Accessed on June 6, 2023.

And – don't hear this the wrong way – love for the lost will not fuel mission. Of course, mercy is a significant part of why we reach out to a dying world with the gospel, but love for the lost will only get us so far.

Because sometimes lost people spit at you.

And sometimes lost people say, "If you really loved me, you would stop preaching at me and celebrate me for who I am."

I've told this story once before, but there was a woman at the Lighthouse a long time ago who absolutely hated me. She mocked me while I shared my weekly devotion. She insulted me anytime I sat at her table. She made fun of my hair, my clothes, the way I talked... She just about had me throwing in the towel. But one day, as I was trying to figure out why in the world I should give up another Thursday afternoon to be heckled, a truth took hold of my heart:

Jesus deserves her praise.

In that moment, my love for her wasn't enough to motivate me to go back, but my love for Jesus was.

As an aside, someone else wound up leading that woman to the Lord a week before she died and I have a picture of her taped to my desk so that I never forget this lesson.

Our evangelism, our mission, our overflow must be fuelled by our worship. If He becomes small in our eyes and peripheral in our hearts then we will NEVER step out of our comfort zone.

But when we see Him in His power and majesty – when our hearts are captivated by the King who came down to the cross – when our minds are overwhelmed by His holiness and His unimaginable glory – THAT is what leads to overflow!

And that is what we are seeing in this text. You will never find a church that is committed to worship that isn't first and foremost committed to worship.

As I prayed about how to bring this sermon to a close, the Lord let my mind to the warning that Jesus issued to the church in Ephesus. After commending their hard work and their careful theology, Jesus said to the church:

But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. (Revelation 2:4 ESV)

Perhaps some of us need to hear that warning today.

As we prepare for this next season, we are going to work hard to raise up leaders, and we are going to position ourselves to listen carefully to the Spirit, and we are going to grow in generosity, but finally, and most importantly, we are going to WORSHIP!

To that end, would you pray with me?