

The Church That Sends

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Acts 13:1-3

Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away."

When our Lord Jesus left this world, He gave His tiny church specific orders. This directive or command has been called the Great Commission. He told the first church, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Those who heard our Lord's commission took it seriously and gave their lives to obey Him. During their lifetimes the Gospel spread from the Middle East to Northern Africa, from Europe to India. It is incredible to think of how much they were able to do in their lifetime without the technological advancements we take for granted.

The church began as one congregation but quickly multiplied and there were hundreds and then thousands of churches because baked into the heart and soul of each congregation was the Lord's commission, "Go."

Each church believed that the kingdom of God was larger than the local church and that each church had a responsibility to live for the kingdom. That meant a selfless and not selfish focus. Today, so many churches obsess on how to get more people and grow their particular church. *Missions* is defined as local church growth, not church growth by multiplying and planting new churches. The mandate with which many churches and their leaders operate is improving their programs so that they can attract other church members from other churches before another church attracts their members.

The early church saw no sacrifice too large for the Master and His master plan of evangelism. The church at Antioch was even willing to sacrifice their senior pastor, Barnabas, and the greatest theologian ever, Saul, or as he is better known, the Apostle Paul. They willingly surrendered their personal desires and obeyed the Lord sending Barnabas and Paul to go to the world at large, preaching the Gospel where it had not yet gone.

What made this church so unique, so special, that God would choose this church to be the missions center of the entire early church? Let's take a few moments and analyze this church.

I. The Church

It was a local church, as we see in verse one:

Now in the church that was at Antioch

Why Antioch? Why not Jerusalem? This church was in Syria and not Israel. Let me share with you a few characteristics of what I think made it a peculiar and special church.

A. Multi-racial Church.

This church was comprised of Jews and Gentiles—bitter enemies. Yet, somehow, through the shed blood of Christ, the bitter enemies came together. They were able to have unity and work together for the great cause of the Great Shepherd.

There is no white church and there is no black church. No Hispanic church and no Asian church. No, we're all the children of God. We should be able to come together no matter the diversities of our cultures or ethnicities. This is the way the church is supposed to work.

It has been a long desire of mine that this church would drop any barriers, prejudices, or biases so that we too could be like the church of Antioch, multi-racial, multi-cultural. I believe it is something like this that can speak dramatically to a culture that is as divided as ours is right now.

What can speak more to the glory of Christ than different people with different backgrounds and customs coming together? How is this possible? Only through the cross of Jesus Christ. It is there that all prejudices and biases are eliminated because it is His kingdom come, His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. I know what it's like in heaven—there's all different tongues and tribes, all different colors of the rainbow. *Oh, God, bless this church in this regard.*

B. Thriving and Growing Congregation.

There was something in the DNA in this church in Antioch that would not stay home. They took Jesus' words so seriously that they looked within their families, their neighbors, their workplaces, the marketplace—where could they go to share the Gospel? And in those places they were taking the Gospel and God was growing this church remarkably.

It was thriving. They were not passive in this commission. They took it seriously. And God said, "That's the kind of church I will send the first missionaries from."

C. Powerfully Doctrinal Church.

How could it not be when the greatest theologian himself was one of the teaching elders? You could not imagine the Apostle Paul being a part of a church if it wasn't doctrinally sound, would you not agree? It was he that taught us through his epistles that there is no church life if it's not built on the foundation of the truth of God, the doctrine of the Word of God.

What would our New Testament be like if it weren't for the magisterial epistles of Romans and Ephesians? How would we understand justification by faith if it were not for the book of Galatians? And how could pastors know their business and calling without the pastoral epistles of Timothy and Titus? What about rejoicing in the moment of affliction as you hear it taught in the book of Philippians? Oh, this was a powerfully doctrinal church. It had no choice, it had Barnabas and Paul as its leading teaching pastors.

These were the characteristics of a church that God could trust with His Great Commission. They had a selfless attitude.

II. The Leadership of the Church

Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. (v. 1)

A. Plurality of Elders.

There's not one lone senior pastor leading this congregation, it's a plurality. Several pastors are engaged in the leadership of this church and that's the way it always is as you peruse and read the New Testament. You never find a lone senior pastor somewhere with a congregation, there was always a plurality, more than one.

That's one of the reasons that Paul, writing to Titus, said,

“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you.”

They had a plurality of elders because God knows best how to tend the flock and one man alone cannot do that. We've learned that lesson here, thankfully. It took us a while but we've gotten there. Over the last couple of years, the Lord has been blessed to add to our number a brother who has been such an instrument in complementing my ministry so that it's not my ministry anymore. It never should have been. But some habits die hard.

Barnabas is cited first for the likely reason that the apostles at Jerusalem sent him to Antioch to verify the integrity of the work and to ground them in the fundamentals of the faith.

“Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. 23 When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad,

and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. 24 For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.” (Acts 11:22-24)

It does seem like Barnabas might have exerted leadership over some of the others, I don't know, it's not safe for us to even speculate. All we do know is that he was sent there by the apostles in Jerusalem.

The next three names we know nothing about them. Simeon and Lucius, who were from Cyprus and Cyrene, perhaps they were refugees who fled Jerusalem because of the persecution that broke out after the martyrdom of Stephen. Maybe these were the men who actually planted that church in Antioch, we do not know for sure.

All we know about Manaen is that he was a childhood friend of Herod Antipas, the same Herod who had John the Baptist beheaded. That's all we know about him and never do we hear about these men mentioned here again.

The fifth person is Paul, you've heard about him, called here in our text by his Hebrew name, Saul. Barnabas went to Tarsus to recruit Paul's help to teach the new church.

So we have five men leading this flock. Why the plurality? Why do we see the necessity of a plurality of elders? Why should every congregation expand the leadership?

B. Different Gifts.

The answer is differing gifts.

“Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers:”

I'm sure Luke did not list all the gifts these men possessed, it wasn't necessary, but he wanted to distinguish that they were different in the way God had gifted them.

Beloved, as a man who likes to lead and take charge, it's good to acknowledge that no one has all the gifts. Not one man has ever been gifted with all of the gifts that a local church and congregation needs. So God raises up a multiplicity of elders so that the entire church can be ministered to and the full personality of Jesus is more evident through the differing gifts of the Spirit of the Living God.

It was of this church God asked to make a great sacrifice.

III. The Holy Spirit's Call

A. The Call for Barnabas and Paul to Go.

“As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’” (Acts 13:2)

The work that the Holy Spirit had called them to was to be apostles to the Gentiles. Soon after Paul's conversion, the Lord appears to Ananias and tells him to go to the blinded Saul. “But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15).

The church at Antioch sent their best preachers on their first missionary journey. The work of the Holy Spirit assigned to Barnabas and Paul was to enlarge the ministry of the Antioch church as the represented them while they preached to the world the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

B. The Call to Go Was Also a Call to Send.

“Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.” (Acts 13:3)

This was not just a call just for Barnabas and Paul, it was a call to the church. This was what God was asking of the church.

Simon Kistemaker wrote in his commentary on Acts:

For the church in Antioch this meant that these believers, by commissioning Barnabas and Paul, would lose two able teachers; that they would promise prayer support for the missionaries; and that Antioch would continue to be a mission center.

All involved heard the call: Barnabas and Paul and the church heard. It was a coming together to do something historic that had never ever been done before. You and I sitting here are the result of this very event. God does know what He's doing.

What's the point of all of this? What's the application for us? If you would allow me, for the next few moments, I would like to make application to us and discuss the call of God, the Holy Spirit, to Oak Grove Baptist Church.

IV. The Call of Oak Grove Baptist Church

Incrementally, over the past year, I have seen that there are some similarities in God's call to Oak Grove and the call of God to the church at Antioch. For 23 years God has given me the awesome privilege to be your pastor. When I came here, I was young and immature. I know I am older, but pray I am more mature. The Lord has used this time here to prepare me for what I now believe He intends for me, an itinerant ministry, meaning a ministry that is not be located in one place but preach wherever invited by others. In other words, to be an evangelist/missionary at large.

A. My Calling.

I am announcing today that the Lord is calling me to itinerant ministry. He is sending me out. I am not leaving Oak Grove Baptist Church, but my ministry is changing and transitioning from a pastoral role to an itinerant role. Let me tell you why I believe that.

It started last summer, 2015. It began with a stirring in my heart. You could describe it as restlessness. At first, I dismissed it as discouragement. I thought I was not happy because I was not seeing the church grow numerically or perhaps even spiritually.

On Saturday mornings, I meet with Brothers Bobby and Whitt for what we call an elders' meeting. We gather to discuss Scripture, pray together, and discuss the church and its ministry. Although Whitt is not an ordained elder, meaning pastor, he is an elder-in-training. I have been working toward this for almost the last three years. Bobby and I invited him to be a part of our meetings as a part of his training.

As I said, this began in the summer of 2015 with a restlessness in my heart that grew to dominate, and I knew I needed to tell Bobby and Whitt. This was too important to conceal from them because we are bound to each other to be totally transparent and accountable to one another. I do nothing without them knowing and approving it, and they, in turn, do the same with me and each other.

When I told them, they both broke and wept and refused to see this could be God's will. Brother Whitt asked if I saw a harvest of souls would I still feel this way. I promised them that I would pray about it and after doing so reported back to them the following week that and told them that if I were seeing more people come to Christ, I would have no desire to leave this pulpit and preach in other places. Thus, I determined to reject the notion that my time as a pastor was coming to an end.

But the restlessness did not end. Over the next year, it grew. I could not shake it or pray it away. I tried to ignore it because I don't want to leave you. I did not want it to be true that the Lord Jesus was redirecting my path. I love you, and you have been a huge part of my life. But the Lord made it clear that I was not discouraged; looking back I can see that it was not discouragement. I've been discouraged. I know what discouragement is; this was not it. However, I didn't know what it was. You have been the only flock I have pastored since I became a Christian. I had heard pastors talk about how God lifts the pastoral burden for a church, but I had never experienced it so I didn't know what to expect.

After my dear friend, Mike Morrow died on April 29 of this year, the Lord spoke to me. He challenged my unbelief. Over the last few years, I had refused many invitations to preach outside of Oak Grove.

One of the reasons I had refused to accept invitations to preach is because I believe that a pastor must be first a shepherd, which means he must be primarily with his flock. The second reason was that I had come to believe that I was ineffective in an itinerate ministry, and even worse, that

I could cause problems for younger and inexperienced pastors. As you know, so many churches today have a warped and incomplete view of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God. Addressing these severe problems can make things difficult for a pastor. When you are a guest preacher, you get to leave the church and not face the repercussions of your preaching, but the pastor does not have that luxury. But he may be asked to leave because of the Gospel you preached. That happened one time. I couldn't bear the weight of such a responsibility, so I stopped preaching elsewhere, except when I knew no collateral damage would occur.

After Mike had gone to be with the Lord, the Holy Spirit showed me that He could and wanted to use me in other venues than Oak Grove. This was why I had been feeling the restlessness on the inside. This is what He was and is calling me to. I surrendered. I told the Lord that if that is what He wanted, I would obey.

However, having refused invitations, they stopped coming. So I told the Lord that if this were His will, He would have to move people to invite me to come and speak. Not even a week passed when I received my first invitation.

Brothers Bobby and Whitt needed to know what God was doing in me. It was either late May or early June, this summer, when I told them. This time their reaction was completely different. They were not only open to it but seemed unsurprised. I realized God had been dealing with them about this as well. We decided to pray privately and come back at a later time and compare notes. Some time went by, a month, and at an elders' meeting I brought it up again.

Without hesitation, they both said that they too believed this was God's will for the church and for me. By this time, I had four invitations to minister outside of our church. We three agreed that these meetings would confirm whether God was or was not calling me to this kind of ministry. We would know by the results if God was in it or not. Each time I preached away from here, I sensed God's presence in powerful ways that is hard to describe. I felt like I did when I came here, that this is what I was made to do.

The Lord has confirmed this to Karen and me several times and in different ways. He has given me testimony when I have preached in other pulpits and places that this is where His anointing is and this is His calling.

I know that the mantle of pastor has been lifted from me and given to others. I cannot tell you what will happen once I step down. I have two short meetings in Texas in the month of January and after that, no other invitations. But I am at such great peace that I know the Lord will take care of my family and me. This is His will.

This change in ministry does not mean that the promise that I believe God gave to me concerning this church will not be fulfilled. I am convinced that somehow this is a part of its fulfillment. It is evident to me that I do not have the necessary gifts to lead you to the place the Lord wants to take you. And that is why I want to discuss the Lord's calling for Oak Grove.

B. The Call to Send.

The call to go and preach that I have received is also a call for Oak Grove to send. I am not a separate entity, a Lone Ranger, doing my own thing. I am one member of this church, and if this call is from the Lord, then it has to be true that it is also a call for this church.

Although I am no longer going to be the senior pastor or an elder of the church, I will be your representative wherever the Lord sends me to preach. I am not resigning from Oak Grove but transitioning to a different kind of ministry. I realize this is not what you expected nor is it probably what you want. With time, it is my hope that you will embrace this as the call of God for our church, and like the church at Antioch, you will joyfully lay hands on me and send me out with your blessing, love, and prayers.

I am firmly persuaded that the Lord is calling you and me to reach out beyond our church and touch other churches and ministries, as well as to labor to see many souls saved and strengthened, not just here, but wherever He in His blessed wisdom chooses to send us.

What will this look like? First, I want to remain as your senior pastor until January 29, 2017. During this time of transition pastor Bobby and I recommend that we ordain Brother Whitt as a co-elder/pastor. Together these two brothers will be able to lead our church as co-pastors. They will continue their full-time employment, but together they will share the pastoral needs of the church so that no one is left behind or wanting for pastoral care. In fact, I believe it will be better than it is now. These two brothers are gifted to pastor and shepherd much better than I am. I have always been at heart an evangelist/revivalist. I have learned to do what a shepherd should, but it was never my strength. These two blessed brothers are naturally gifted to shepherd. I have given them knowledge about pastoring, which means I have informed their minds with the things I have learned, but their hearts were already informed with the love and compassion that a good pastor needs.

On few occasions, I have said that Karen and I were gifts given to Oak Grove. Egotism or conceit had nothing to do with the statement. I said it because of Ephesians 4:11 that states that pastors are a gift to the church. Karen and I were God's very best to you, meaning we were what the church needed. No one could better do what God called us here to do. Charles Spurgeon plainly could preach better than me, but he couldn't do what only I was called to do. He wasn't made for you, and I wasn't made for London's Metropolitan Tabernacle.

However, our time as your pastor is coming to a close, which means that Bobby, who already is one of your pastors, and Whitt will be God's gift to you. I am no longer God's best for you, but they are. And they will also be God's best to me because they too will be my pastors.

I know you will give them the same love, respect, and support you have given me as a pastor of Oak Grove Baptist Church. Lift them up in prayer, follow them as they follow Christ, give them double honor as men of God.

Second, our missional community groups will become even more strategic. One of my goals over the years was to see this church perform as the New Testament depicts the body to work. The individual members of the body are to be involved in the work of the ministry. Since we started the missional communities in January, I see this developing. New leaders will be trained, and new groups will multiply, and this church will be more like the church that God intended. As more of you grow in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and your love for one another, the more souls will be saved and added to the church. If you don't believe that right now, you better watch. Don't run too soon because you'll miss it. This is what I know God will do.

Once again, I see the wisdom of God that this is the time for me to step aside and let these two young men lead you. My leadership style is not the kind that is needed to grow a church. The prophet does not build large churches; he is a winnowing fork that separates. His preaching always calls for a commitment that often exceeds the people's level of devotion. Brothers Bobby and Whitt are more pastorally gifted. They are not the prophet who is all too willing to bring out the whip and overturn the tables. You need shepherds not a cattle driver. I'm a cattle driver and I always will be. That's what He's made me to be.

The Lord is calling you and me to sacrifice for His kingdom, just like He called Antioch. For some of you, it won't feel like a sacrifice. I pray that it doesn't feel like too hard of a sacrifice for anyone. He bids us release the ball and chain of selfishness and make freedom's sacrifice so that we can experience more of freedom's fruit. His call is in some small way an Antioch call. It is a mandate not to invest all our resources here but be willing to be broken so that the anointed fragrance of His glory may flow forth.

What about RTM? RTM will go on as nothing has changed. It will continue as it is today. RTM centers primarily around my preaching and writing ministry, for the most part, so that's going to continue and therefore RTM will remain as it is today.

Karen and I will always love you, and nothing will change that. Whether I am here or somewhere else preaching the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, my love continues for you. You will forever remain my church, even though I cannot remain your pastor. Please, don't prove yourself to be Durhamites and leave this body because I am not in this pulpit. Follow Jesus and love this church. Live for Jesus by loving this church. Each of you are needed here. This is our calling and to reject it is to reject the One who is calling us. He loves this church; He bled and died for Oak Grove, and I cannot believe He has allowed me to invest 23 years of my life here if not for something better for you.

And so, I am asking you to prayerfully consider sending me out as your evangelist/missionary. The Lord is calling not just me but you also, to have a kingdom heart and a selfless will to obey our Master and Redeemer's commission to go.

People, in general, don't like change, but change is inevitable. Nothing stays the same except the great Immutable One. He never changes. It is my hope that the Lord will grant you the peace

to accept this and firmly rest in the certainty that Karen and I are resting. We together can and should trust in the Lord. "He is too good to be unkind and too wise to be mistaken. If you cannot trace His hand, you can trust His heart." Amen.