



ACTS 13

THE SENDING OF MISSIONARIES & THE PATTERN OF GOSPEL PROCLAMATION

Acts 13 marks a major turning point in the history of the early Church. Up to this point, the gospel had primarily spread through the witness of apostles and scattered believers in response to persecution. But here, we see the intentional, Spirit-led commissioning of missionaries to take the gospel beyond the boundaries of Judea. What begins in the multicultural city of Antioch becomes a pattern for global missions: Paul and Barnabas are set apart, sent out, and strategically proclaim the gospel to Jews first, and then to Gentiles. This chapter initiates a rhythm that Paul would follow throughout his ministry—and one that echoes God’s larger plan for redemption through Christ, reaching all nations and peoples.

Acts 13 opens in the city of Antioch with the selection of two of the church leaders by the Holy Spirit for missionary work: “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’” (v. 2). This moment is significant because it represents the first intentional sending of missionaries by a local church. The church in Antioch, composed of both Jews and Gentiles, models the New Testament church in prayer, worship, sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, and active participation in God’s mission.

The act of laying hands on Paul and Barnabas was not just symbolic—it affirmed the authority and unity of the church behind this mission (see also Acts 6:6, 2 Timothy 1:6). This special commissioning is the first of many in church history where the work of missions is rooted in the local church and led by the Holy Spirit.

As Paul and Barnabas begin their journey, an intentional missional strategy unfolds. In each new city they visited — Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and beyond—Paul began by preaching in the synagogue to the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. This pattern first appears in Acts 13:5: “They proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews.” This was not merely a matter of convenience. Paul believed the gospel should first be offered to the Jews, as God’s covenant people through whom the Messiah had come (notice what Paul later wrote in Romans 1:16: “to the Jew first and also to the Greek”).

This approach continued throughout Paul’s journeys. In Thessalonica: “Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures” (Acts 17:2). In Berea and Corinth, the synagogue remained his first stop (Acts 17:10; 18:4). Paul’s method underscores the theological conviction that the gospel fulfills Jewish expectation and is rooted in the Old Testament promises.

In Acts 13:46–47, when Paul and Barnabas face rejection from Jewish leaders in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch, they respond boldly:

“It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.”

This turning point is both strategic and theological. Paul quotes Isaiah 49:6 to show that God’s plan has always included the nations: “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.” The Gentiles’ positive response in verse 48—“when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord”—serves as evidence of God’s expanding kingdom beyond Israel.

This pattern—offer the gospel to the Jews, then turn to the Gentiles—would be repeated throughout Paul’s ministry (see Acts 18:6; 28:28). It also reflects the mystery now revealed in Christ: “This mystery is that through the gospel the

Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 3:6). God’s redemptive plan, once revealed through a chosen people, was now breaking open to include all peoples, languages, and nations – just as Jesus had foretold in Acts 1:8.

Acts 13 is far more than a travel itinerary; it is the launching pad of a worldwide gospel movement. Through the Holy Spirit-led commissioning of Paul and Barnabas, the early church begins to truly embrace its mission to the nations. Through Paul’s synagogue-first strategy, his commitment to honoring God’s promises to Israel becomes the priority. As the mission faces opposition and pivots to the Gentiles, God’s eternal plan unfolds in which He will gather to Himself people from every tribe and nation. The principles found in this chapter shape the remaining fifteen chapters of Acts – and remains the model as the Church engages in missions today.

PASSAGE INSIGHT

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