

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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There's More: Sending Out

by Dan Trygg

“Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² While they were ministering to 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, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. ⁴ So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went”
Acts 13:1-4

Last time, we talked about how **it is always the nature of the kingdom of God to expand, and reach beyond our lives into the lives of other people, and even into new areas.** Jesus said that it would spread like leaven in a lump of dough (Matt. 13:33). **If it is healthy, it will spread.**

In the NT, we see how the church multiplied in Jerusalem. **There was a period of time when the early church experienced the impact of their body-life upon their neighbors within that city.** Family members, acquaintances and even people who were originally hostile to them (or at least, standoffish) were impressed and influenced by the working of God in the lives of the believers. **They saw the transformation of lives, answers to prayer, signs and wonders of God's hand at work, and the amazing love and care of those who were followers of Jesus toward one another, and even toward outsiders, ...and they wanted to find out more.** The first and primary ministry of any group of believers is to create an environment where people are seeking more of God, investing in their own spiritual lives and the lives of one another. **The goal of the church is that everyone might become equipped, filled with the life and fruit of the Spirit, and engaged in serving and helping one another follow Christ more effectively** (Eph. 4:11-16).

That was what was happening in the Jerusalem church of those early days. **They were meeting in small gatherings in homes, where they could learn the doctrine of the apostles, where they could share their questions, their struggles and their hearts with one another during extended times of fellowship over meals, and where they responded to the needs people had with intercessory prayer or practical help.** This was the discipleship regimen of the early church. **They were making disciples, ...active followers, practitioners, ministry-apprentices, fellow-workers. Everyone was involved in this dynamic, and everyone was learning (1.) what it meant to be a follower of Jesus Christ; and, (2.) how to have a productive meeting with other believers.** They were *all* involved in all aspects of these disciplines: learning the doctrine, sharing hearts, having food together and meeting needs through prayer and generosity.

Aside from those who had been converted at Pentecost who had returned to their homes after the feast, it seems that it took a persecution to get the early church to scatter and take the good news message on the road (Acts 8). Church life in Jerusalem had been so good, so effective, that there was little interest in going anywhere else! They saw and experienced God at work in their midst, and in their lives, and many people were responding. Wherever the kingdom of God advances, however, it doesn't take long before there is some push-back from the enemy. In the case of the early church of Jerusalem, it came in the martyrdom of Stephen and the persecution headed up by Saul of Tarsus. Many people fled Jerusalem to avoid imprisonment, beatings or worse. **Wherever those excited believers went, however, they shared Jesus, and they started other home meetings (other “church groups”).** What the enemy meant for evil, ...to intimidate and destroy the church..., was used by God *to further activate believers and to spread the gospel and expand the kingdom of God.* **Like a dandelion, it is the nature of the church to dissipate and spread abroad. It is part of the life cycle of any healthy, Spirit-directed group. It will happen in a variety of ways, ...but it will happen.** Sometimes it is through a quiet process of expansion through families and friends, and sometimes it is at the tempest of a violent storm of persecution.

It is important for us to recognize this, and to be preparing for this, mentally, and in our ministry vision. When we are not prepared or looking for this, we may become possessive or even discourage people, when they are feeling led to move on to another location. Or we may question what God is doing when circumstances disrupt our lives. We need to recognize that **God is the One who calls people together to form the spiritual organism that is the body of Christ in a particular location. We are called together for a time, ...for now.** We can't say how long this will be. James, the brother of Jesus, reminds us of this. He warns against assuming that we know how the future is going to unfold. Even to plan to be in a place for a year is presumptuous! **We are to remember that our plans are not always what God is planning.** We should frame our planning within the context of, “*If the Lord wills, we will do this or that.*” **We are the Lord's servants. It is His prerogative to determine our duty assignments.** We must hold our own plans, and the plans of others, with an open hand, ...because *we* don't know what God may have in mind. To go beyond that is a matter of pride and presumption (Jas. 4:13-16).

So, after a couple of good years of wonderful growth, fellowship, spiritual power and evangelism, God permitted the church to be scattered. **People went in every direction**, although the apostles remained in Jerusalem. Philip, one of the seven deacons from Acts 6, went to **Samaria**, and preached the word there. It was a significant step forward in the advance of the gospel for the Samaritans to accept Christ. Then, he was led by the Spirit to share about Jesus with the Ethiopian eunuch, who accepted Christ, was baptized, and brought the message back with him to **Ethiopia**. Philip went on to **Caesarea by the sea**, where he made his home. We meet him again in Acts 21, when Paul stayed with him on his way to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey. Philip had four daughters who were gifted with prophecy (Acts 21:8,9). It would seem that a church met in his home, or the home of Cornelius, the centurion who Peter led to Christ in Acts 10. **There were often multiple home churches in a community** (Acts 2:46).

Some of those who fled Jerusalem went as far as **Antioch in Syria** (Acts 11:19-26). There they proclaimed the gospel to non-Jews, and these folks also gave themselves to follow Jesus. (Antioch was the second largest city in the Roman empire. Within forty years [after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD], it became the new center of the Christian movement.) When Jerusalem first heard the report of the conversions at Antioch, they sent Barnabas to investigate. He sought out the now-converted Saul of Tarsus to help disciple these new believers. They were actively engaged in this work for a year, when God commissioned Barnabas and Saul to be sent out by the church in Antioch to preach the gospel in other places. They went to **Cyprus**, where Barnabas had been from, and then to **Phrygia and Pisidia** (modern day Turkiye) where the family of Sergius Paulus was from. They preached the gospel in synagogues, but gathered converts into home groups. **The Christian movement was a home church movement for the next nearly three hundred years.** Home churches were started in Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, Colossae, Hierapolis, Laodicea, Philadelphia, Smyrna, Pergamum, Sardis, Thyatira, and in Rome, to mention a few places named in the NT. This list mostly followed the travels of Paul, but the other apostles were also preaching, starting home meetings and making disciples in other areas. **It was not just the apostles, either. The Holy Spirit was motivating others to move to new areas to spread the gospel and start new gatherings of believers.**

As we look over the record of the expansive growth of the Christian movement in the first century, ...or throughout history..., we find that the church of Jesus Christ spreads through people. True evangelism and church growth is not a program, or a project. **It is the natural reproduction of life, spreading from one person to another**, one neighbor to another, one community to another, one culture to another. **God is the One who calls and sends His people. He moves His people into the places where their lives intersect with others that He intends to reach.** Whether He uses outward circumstances, ...like persecution, a job change, or a change of residence..., or He uses an inner motivation and personal calling, **He is the One who moves His people into place, and presents them with opportunities to share the life and relationship with God that they are experiencing with others.**

The job of the church is to equip the members so that they can (1.) know the doctrine; (2.) be led by the Spirit of Christ; and (3.) become like Jesus in their character. We are also to (4.) learn how to speak the truth in love to others. As we pursue these goals, walk this walk, and learn to follow the leading of Jesus, we become activated disciples, and become able to guide others in also becoming active disciples. The job of the church is *not* to get more people, or to build a building, or to have religious services, or to have a bunch of programs. **The job of the church is to grow, mature and activate people to live for Jesus. If we do that, the life that is in us will spread.** We will affect others, both inside and outside of our group. **And, in due time, God will send some of our people out to start new ministry groups and new churches.**

Sending people out is often a bittersweet experience. Imagine what it was like for the church at Antioch to send out Barnabas and Saul. They had been key disciples in their midst. They had been examples, teachers, counselors, encouragers and beloved friends. They may have thought that they would be there for a long time, ...possibly for years to come. Then, however, at a prayer meeting one day, the Holy Spirit plainly indicated that they were to set Barnabas and Saul apart for a work of service that He intended for them. We don't know what that all entailed. It *certainly* involved laying hands on them, and commissioning them. It *may* also have included some level of financial support to send them on their way. The point is that **God chose, and they listened. It meant the loss of the presence and ministry of these dear friends in their lives**, while they were gone, **but it also represented an extension of their ministry to other people.** It was an adventure, and an investment in the expanse of the kingdom of God. You can bet that the people Barnabas and Saul had disciples and worked with were praying for them as they went! They were a key part of the work that God was calling these brothers to do, even though they remained at the home base. **Whenever they returned from their travels, they stopped in to report on what God did with them where they were. As they recounted what God did, there was great rejoicing and praise. They celebrated the goodness of God.**

A church is never too small to send out laborers. It is not up to them. It is up to God. He calls and sends. Our job is to recognize what He is doing, and encourage those He sends. We are to come alongside in prayer, and in whatever other ways the Lord may reveal. Celebrate the signs of life which God is producing in our midst!