

Acts 13:1-3

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[0 : 00] It was good to see and to hear a little from Emma this morning.

The original plan, what I'd asked Emma originally was if she could do that this evening, that I would interview her this evening, and maybe slightly longer than what I was able to do in the time available this morning.

But as we speak, she's at the airport waiting for a flight to London, so that wasn't going to happen. And the reason why I had thought this evening would have been a very suitable time to do that, I suppose the morning had the advantage that more people were able to see and hear her.

But why I'd originally thought to do that in the evening is, well, a couple of reasons. One is that we are trying to give the evening service a very deliberate mission focus, and so having Emma here was an obvious opportunity to do that.

But also because speaking to her, interviewing her would have tied in nicely with the sermon that I want to preach this evening, where I want to explore, in the light of the passages that we've read, what I'm calling some of the marks of ascending church.

[1 : 14] Now, why do I use the language of ascending church? Well, in the context of Emma, Emma's ascending church in the language that Africa Inland Mission employ, a very helpful biblical language, we are her ascending church.

And I want to think a little bit about what does that even mean? What are the marks of ascending church, of a church that sends out men and women to the mission field to serve God at home and, indeed, beyond.

Now, there's a real sense in which every church is or should be ascending church. A church without missionaries, a church that isn't sending, a church without sent ones is a bit like, if I can pick up on the theme that I was speaking with the children about this morning, it's a bit like a KFC without chicken.

It just isn't a church if it's not doing that, if it's not sending out men and women in the service of God. Now, that doesn't have to be crossing borders or oceans, though it can be, but we must be ever sending our people out into the world in the service of God.

So, while we recognize that if we're a church at all, then we must, of necessity, be ascending church, I think it could be helpful for us to explore and discover what some of the marks of ascending church are.

[2 : 53] And as we do that, I hope that that will help us better understand our responsibilities vis-a-vis Emma, for example, and others, but also help develop as a church in such a way as to become more prolific, more persevering in sending men and women into the mission field at home and abroad.

So, I want to look at the two passages that we read there in Acts chapter 13 and 14. And hopefully, the reason for choosing these two passages that are separated by almost two chapters will become apparent in due course.

Now, the structure that I have for this evening is very simple. From the two passages, I've identified what I'm calling five marks of ascending church.

Now, the nature of this is that I'm sure if somebody had set me the challenge, you know, you got to find ten, I probably could have found ten. Or if they said, you know, I like the three main ones, no doubt I could have tried to do that.

But as I work with the material, five things in particular struck me. But as I say, that isn't, you know, there's not, that's not an absolute.

[4 : 07] But there's five that I want to highlight this evening from these passages. Mark 1, ascending church is a church that nurtures, a church that disciples.

Chapter 13, Acts 13, verse 1. Notice what it says there. In the church at Antioch, there were prophets and teachers. We'll just stop there. I think we can read that and we say, well, okay, good. Good. It's almost just, well, it's a statement of fact. That's what there were. There were prophets and there were teachers in the church at Antioch. Good. Let's move on. But if we just pause for a moment and say, well, why?

Why is it that there were prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch? Why is it that they were so well served in terms of able and gifted leadership?

Why is it that the church in Antioch was so characterized? And that's the question I'm posing. Do we say, well, it's just one of these things, you know, these leaders, these prophets, these teachers? [5 : 13] Well, they just appeared as the church was growing, as people were converted, then these prophets and teachers popped up. And we said, oh, good. We've got prophets and we've got teachers.

Or maybe we could take a mystical line and say, well, you know, God is the God who calls men to be prophets and teachers. And maybe especially when we see the language of prophets, we say, well, that was a very, what shall we say, supernatural calling that we find in the early church and depended entirely on God's initiative in calling men to this office or this task.

And we're not denying for a moment, of course, that God does call men and women to different areas of service. But I think the reason why in Antioch we find these men, and I say men because in the list here it is men that are mentioned, isn't as mystical as we might want to paint it.

The reason is that this was a church that was taught. Even among the names mentioned, we have those who were perhaps at the beginning responsible for the teaching.

In chapter 11, verses 25 and 26, we read a little bit or discover a little bit about how things began there in Antioch. So, it's just in the same page or the previous page from Acts 13, 11, 25.

[6 : 40] Then Barnabas went to Tarsus. So, this is the same Barnabas as mentioned there in chapter 13, verse 1, went to Tarsus to look for Saul, also on the list there.

And he found him. He brought him to Antioch. So, for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. So, here's a church that was well taught. Here's a church where Barnabas and Saul and perhaps others also were involved. Indeed, those who were being taught in due course would have taken on teaching responsibility.

And they were being taught. They were being nurtured. They were being disciplined. And so, you had this resource, this human resource in the church available to be sent.

We're not going to be able to send anybody if we don't prepare people, if we don't train people, if we don't teach people. If we don't equip people to send, then there'll be nobody to send. The church in Antioch was a church marked by teaching, by discipleship.

[7 : 47] The buzzword that you hear a lot these days is culture. And people speak a lot about church culture. And that's fine. It's a way of speaking that's perfectly legitimate.

And if we're going to use that language, as I'm going to now, we can maybe say two things about the Antioch church culture. I think there was what we might call a discipleship culture. They took seriously the task of making disciples.

Disciples don't just spontaneously appear. They are made. And it's clear that Antioch, that was happening. And new converts were being taught.

They were being nurtured. They were being disciplined. And as a result, in due course, there were those suitable for the missionary task, for being sent, able to leave the nest, as it were, and go and serve elsewhere.

There was also, I think, in Antioch, from our understanding of the church in the city of Antioch, there was what we might call a church planting culture. Here we read of, and Luke speaks of, the church at Antioch.

[9 : 01] And I think it's clear from the evidence that we have that Luke isn't speaking about one congregation. Antioch was a significant city where the church had grown in a very significant way.

And it would seem very clear that within the city of Antioch, there were several congregations, though here spoken of collectively as the church at Antioch. The question is, why were there all these congregations?

Well, they didn't all begin on the same day. One church would have begun. And then as that grew, others were planted within the city.

And the value of that in terms of training leaders, in terms of nurturing missionaries, is that that multiplies the tasks that need to be performed.

It multiplies the opportunities for people to exercise or discover their gifts, maybe of teaching or preaching, evangelistic gifts, or whatever they might be in these congregations that were spreading out across the city of Antioch.

[10:07] One of the dangers of a settled congregation like our own, there are advantages. It's very comfortable. But one of the dangers, it's a danger we need to recognize.

It's not a bad thing in itself. But something we need to recognize is that we can sometimes be quite slow to see the importance or the urgency of training leaders. Because we look around and you say, well, we're reasonably well served with leaders.

We don't need to train a whole bunch of new leaders. We've kind of got the number we need. Or we might imagine that. But if you're busy planting churches, then that creates a very different scenario, where the urgency of training up those who will take on responsibility, perhaps at an earlier stage or age than we might imagine, is normal.

But just because that's what we imagine. So, in Antioch, there was this discipleship culture, this church planting culture, and that contributed to this first mark of this sending church, a church that nurtures, a church that disciples its people.

Notice also, and this is really just a kind of curious aside, but notice also that this emerging leadership is not only well taught, but diverse in its composition.

[11:27] The list there in verse 1 is an interesting one in terms of looking through the names. First of all, we're told about Barnabas. Now, from chapter 4 and verse 36 of Acts, we discover that Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus.

So, you have one of the leaders mentioned here, this man from Cyprus. Then we're told about Simeon called Niger. In all probability, he was African.

Some suggest that this Simon was Simon of Cyrene, who carried the cross for Jesus on the way to Golgotha. We don't know that for a fact, but there are one or two coincidences, we might say, about not only his name, but the fact that he was African.

Cyrene, of course, is a city in Libya, and so that would tie in. We know the Bible speaks of the sons of Simon of Cyrene, who clearly were known within the church, and it would seem became Christians, and so it's possible the father also.

All of this is speculative, but not groundless speculation. Anyway, the point is that you have this man of African origin. The next man on the list is explicitly identified as being from North Africa, Lucius of Cyrene.

[12:41] Then the next man on the list, Manain, what we're told about him is that he was, he'd been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch. So, that would be Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great.

And the language that's used that is translated, he was brought up with, suggests he might have been a foster brother, or he might have been a close friend of this very prominent and powerful individual.

So, you have a diversity in terms of social class, you have a diversity in terms of nationality and origin, within this small group of names mentioned of some of the leaders of the church in Antioch. I think if we are going to be, or if we are going to grow and develop and mature as an ascending church, we need people to send, believers from all manner of backgrounds, trained to teach, to evangelize, to serve, whatever it is that God calls them to.

One of the actions that we've identified in the strategy document is to create a training and education team to look at how we tackle this responsibility more intentionally and more effectively.

[13:52] So, the first mark, ascending church, disciples, teaches. But the second mark that I find here, and I just will mention it very fleetingly, is that ascending church worships. In verse 2 we read, while they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, and it goes on.

But just the very first part of that verse, while they were worshipping the Lord. Now, the word worship, depending on the context in which it's used, is a very broad word.

Everything we do, in a sense, constitutes worship if we are Christians. We think of the language of the Bible, it speaks of whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do to the glory of God.

So, there is a sense in which everything we do comes under that category of worship. But here, clearly the word is being used more narrowly in the sense of praise, perhaps a gathering, such as

the one we're taking part in this evening.

And, of course, any church gathers to worship. It would be a strange church that didn't do that. But I think here, when it's stated so explicitly that the church was gathered to worship, it speaks of a church that had recognized that the worship of God was the core activity, was the key burden of the church, that God be worshipped.

[15:16] They were a body of believers who were persuaded that God is worthy of all worship. And such a perspective, such a conviction, is at the center of ascending church.

It's the mark of ascending church, that God-centeredness that fuels the sending of missionaries. You see, the greatest impulse for seeing the sending out of missionaries as being necessary, as being important, is a conviction that God is worthy to be worshipped, a jealousy for the worship of God, a sense of indignation that God isn't being worshipped as He ought to be worshipped. And so the need to rectify that, or do certainly what is in our power to do, to rectify that in sending out men and women to share the good news that others would be brought in and become part of God's worshipping community.

And so an ascending church is a worshipping church. But a third mark of ascending church that I find here, still in verse 2 of chapter 13, is the ascending church prays and listens.

Because reading again verse 2, 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.

[16:37] So the church were gathered, they were fasting, I think we can understand that, as being a dedicated time set aside for prayer. And it would seem prayer for direction concerning the sending out of men for gospel ministry.

So the church had gathered and had dedicated this time to praying to God and listening to God, to discerning God's will for them as a congregation.

And of course, as they prayed, as they fasted, so God did speak and did grant the direction that they sought. You know, we read this and we're kind of intrigued, well, how does that work?

You know, you have the Holy Spirit said and you have it in inverted commas there, kind of like a, sounds like an audible voice from heaven, you know, set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.

And we think, well, that's kind of odd or, if not odd, certainly unfamiliar territory for us. It's maybe not as mystical as it appears.

[17:44] We've already been told that, in verse one, that there were prophets in the church at Antioch. It's quite possible that what has been described here, in terms of the words that were spoken, were the words of a prophet.

And of course, we know that a prophet spoke the word of God. So God granted this direction. He spoke to the church through the mouthpiece, if you wish, of one of the prophets that there were there in Antioch.

We don't need to spend time speculating on exactly what this looked like. What we can say with confidence is that if we as a group of God's people, as a congregation of God's people, dedicate with that priority, the gathering together to pray and to listen, then God will speak.

God will make known His will by whatever means that He chooses. We sometimes think, wouldn't it be nice if it was a voice that was, you know, we could actually just write it down.

Okay, that's what it is. That's what we need to do. We were just having that conversation this afternoon with Emma and with Ruth, Ruth Box of AIM, who was with us this morning.

[18:52] I'm sure she had come up to have a chat with Emma and myself just about the future, especially in the light of Emma's evolving circumstances. And so it's not too clear. And we were saying, wouldn't it be nice if, you know, God just, you know, gave us that audible message and we could know, ah, right, that's what you have to do.

Well, that isn't the way He ordinarily communicates with us. We need to do the hard work of reading the Bible and becoming clear on the principles of Scripture, discussing with others to try and come to a clarity and discernment of what God's will is, be it for an individual or for a congregation.

But the point is, ascending church is a church that prays and a church that listens. If we aren't praying and if we aren't listening, then we won't hear what God has to say. Maybe God has some really exciting things to say to us on this matter, but if we're not listening, then we won't hear them. A fourth mark that we can find here in this first passage and in verse 3 is that ascending church is a church that obeys and gives.

Verse 3, so after they had fasted and prayed, so they've heard God's direction on the matter, and then we read, so after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them, that is on Barnabas and Saul, and sent them off.

[20 : 15] Now, Saul and Barnabas, we've already noticed how they were central, really, to the life of the church in Antioch.

They were the men who had been principally responsible for teaching this church, indeed this collection, really, of congregations in the city.

They weren't surplus to requirements in Antioch, and I wonder, though here it's stated very clearly that the church bought in with conviction to God's direction, but you just wonder if there weren't maybe some in the church, understandably, who were a little concerned.

Maybe they felt that they couldn't afford to send men of this caliber to go and to leave them, and to leave them without their support, without their teaching, without their maturity and guidance.

But God had spoken, and Ascending Church is a church that obeys and gives. In this case, they gave their best people, and we need to be willing to give our best people.

[21 : 28] It's always difficult if folks in the church who we value and who contribute, who are gifted and enthusiastic and committed, when they go, whatever the reason might be, you know, that's difficult.

You know, we'd rather they stay. But Ascending Church has the mentality that rather than seeing that as a negative, we see it as a positive. We see it as a privilege that in some way we could be used of God to send our very best people, if we can use that language, to serve God elsewhere. And of course, as we send, so there also needs to be the giving that follows on that in terms of, in the case of missionaries, the support that is required for them to engage in whatever it is that God has called them to engage in.

Let me just mention one final mark of Ascending Church, and that takes us to the second passage, and I'm just going to look at it just globally. We're not going to go through it verse by verse. The title I've given to this mark is Ascending Church Takes Ownership.

Now, the reason why I read these two passages and separated by a couple of chapters is that really what you've got here is an interesting development in that in chapter 13 at the beginning, Paul and Barnabas are sent by the church at Antioch.

[22 : 49] They're committed to the work and they're sent. And then we're given a description of where they went and what they did, the churches they planted, the leadership that they placed in these new churches.

And then, in that second passage, what we have is Paul and Barnabas coming back home, almost doing deputation. It was their furlough or whatever language we used to use about talking about missionaries.

And they came back to report to their sending church. You see, the church hadn't sent them and said, well, God bless you and I hope everything goes well.

No, they continued to have a live connection with the men they had sent. They had taken ownership of this missionary enterprise and very particularly their responsibilities towards Paul and Barnabas.

As I say, they didn't, you know, at the beginning of chapter 13, they didn't arrange a nice farewell with tea and buns and an envelope with a good stash of cash and say, right guys, off you go and all the best.

[23 : 57] And who knows, we may see you again or we may not. No, this was a sending that implied a continuing responsibility for those who had been sent.

They took ownership. We read there in that passage in chapter 14 that they had been committed to the grace of God by those who sent them.

There in verse 26 from Italia, they sailed back to Antioch where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. The ownership of the church in Antioch would have involved, although it's not stated explicitly, I think we can with great confidence affirm a prayer commitment for Paul and Barnabas as they went from town to town.

Obviously, communication was such that they wouldn't have been able to keep them informed day by day of their movements, but nonetheless, they would have had a rough idea of where they were going, what they were doing, and they would have been praying for them.

And they took a live interest in the work of those who had been sent. When they returned to Antioch, what do we read in verse 27? On arriving there, they gathered the church together and

reported all that God had done through them and how He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.

[25 : 16] Again, if the picture that we painted is correct, that there would have been a number of congregations in Antioch, this seems to have been a gathered occasion when from all these different house churches or whatever you want to call them, they came to some central location to hear the reports of Saul and Barnabas, of the churches that had been planted, of those who had come to faith, of the difficulties that they'd endured, the hardships that they had had to go through, and so on and so forth.

And there was this real interest in, this real excitement in discovering how things were going for their missionaries, for their sent ones. And so they take ownership of the work.

And of course, they rejoiced with those sent in the work done. And just maybe to draw things to a close, having, well, we've identified these five marks, but just one final thing to say.

In connection with the work that had been done, it is striking how the work of mission is conceived by Luke in describing this missionary meeting, just in this passage in chapter 14.

Because Luke, in the manner in which he speaks, in the manner in which he describes the event, he identifies three actors, if you wish, in the missionary enterprise.

[26 : 38] First and foremost, he acknowledges that this work is God's work. There in verse 27, on arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done.

That's the very first thing that's stated about that meeting, that Paul and Barnabas reported on all that God had done. The work of mission is God's work. And of course, this reality provides us with our guarantee of success.

It doesn't depend on our abilities or our strategies or our skill in the missionary enterprise. It's God's work. That reality also ought to stir in us great expectations because God always does a good work. What God does is always of the highest caliber. The product of God's work is always inspiring and beautiful and amazing.

So it's God's work. But it's also church work. You see, it was the church that sent Saul and Barnabas and it was to the church that Saul and Barnabas were accountable. You know, there's a two-way street here.

[27 : 46] The church sent Paul and Barnabas but Paul and Barnabas are in turn accountable to the church. You know, Saul and Barnabas might have said, well, we started the church in Antioch. We're not accountable to them. We're over them.

But that's not the attitude they had. They didn't think they were lone rangers who would just go here for a moment and here for another spell and do what they thought best. No, they were accountable to, in this case, their sending church, the church of Antioch.

So, it's God's work. It's church work. But, of course, it's also our work. It is the work of us as God's workers. That's the language Luke uses. They reported all that God had done through them.

Yes, it was God working, but God working through them. today, we work in partnership with God. We are, to use the very bold language of Paul when he writes to the Corinthians, we are God's co-workers.

And this truth that we work in partnership with God is very beautifully captured by Isaiah in, I think it's in chapter 62.

[28 : 51] I haven't noted the reference here, but I think it's in chapter 62 where he speaks in these terms. And I'll just read the part of the verse that's relevant. All that we have accomplished, you have done for us.

This is a believer addressing God, the prophet addressing God. All that we have accomplished, you have done for us. It doesn't seem to make sense. Well, we've accomplished it. Well, we've accomplished it.

But no, even that which at some level we can identify as our accomplishments, God has done for us. Well, let's examine ourselves and ask the question, do we as a congregation exhibit these marks?

As I say, no doubt we could, with a little bit of work, we could come up with other marks. But let's focus on these ones for the moment. Do we exhibit these marks? Are we a church that disciplines, that teaches, that nurtures?

Are we a church that worships? That's to be understood as a church where the worship of God is core to who we are. the concern that God be lifted up, that God be worshipped not only by us, but

by others.

[30 : 00] Are we a church that prays and listens to what God has to say to us? Or do we simply carry on in our merry way, oblivious to whatever God might be trying to say to us?

Are we a church that obeys and gives of what we have, of what we have been given? Are we a church that takes ownership of those we commend to gospel ministry?

Well, pause for thought and reflection. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the book of Acts. We thank you for all that we can learn about the church, about gospel ministry, about the missionary enterprise.

We thank you for the practical, down-to-earth wisdom and the principles that we can draw from these chapters. We are in a different age.

We are in a different context. We acknowledge that, but the basic principles remain true, remain valid from generation to generation.

[31 : 08] Help us to be reflective, not to be ever navel-gazing, but certainly to be reflective and to examine ourselves as we, each of us, individually as believers, but also as a congregation to identify where we need to improve, where we need to seek your help to more clearly exhibit some of the marks that we've identified here in your word this evening.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.