

PROCLAIMING HIS SALVATION

Acts 13:1-52

A church is great or mediocre just as her members are great or mediocre Christians. A church cannot be any greater than the individuals who compose its membership. In the church at Antioch there were prophets, or men whom God could trust as His spokesmen, knowing that they would be faithful in delivering His Word to the people. There were teachers in the membership who were ready and willing to use their gifts to the glory of the Lord. The membership was missionary in spirit. In the membership were missionaries like Paul, Barnabas and John Mark. Others stayed at home and supported them as they sent forth to proclaim the gospel of Christ. They also had members who were willing to fast for Christ's sake. They preferred to fast rather than to feast.

In the membership of this church were those who were busy ministering to the needs about them. They sought opportunities to introduce others to Christ, to edify the saved, to help the distressed, to comfort the sorrowing, and to strengthen the discouraged. The membership in general was eager to tell what Christ had done for them. The Holy Spirit led the church to realize that its witness should extend beyond the city of Antioch.

The initial step in the proclamation of Christ's salvation by foreign missionaries began in united prayer. The members of the church at Antioch had a season of solemn and earnest waiting on God. So possessed were the souls of these Christians with the depth and urgency of the need, for which they were praying, that all desire for food and pleasure lost their power over them.

While they waited on the Lord, the message of the Holy Spirit came to them. The Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas to be missionaries, and then made it known to the church that these particular men were the ones who should do this work of proclaiming the gospel of Christ in the regions beyond. While the work at Antioch was prospering, the Holy Spirit said to the church: "Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have call them." Without murmuring or hesitation, with fasting and prayer, they laid their hands on Barnabas and Saul, ordaining them to the high and holy task to which the Holy Spirit had called them, and then sent them away.

When the Holy Spirit called Barnabas and Paul, He did not force them into the work against their wills. On the contrary, they had the power of choice, of decision and of will. This mission enterprise did not make great men out of two obscure and indifferent individuals. Barnabas was a good man and full of the Holy Spirit before he was ever sent out as a missionary. The greatest recommendation which these men had was not the success which they obtained in distant lands, but it was their spirit at home before they were ever sent out. The Lord never overlooks real merit in individuals.

As certainly as the Lord called them into the work, He called the church at Antioch to support them. If there were sacrifices to be made, the church was to share in them as much as these two missionaries were to do so. They were not sent out as free-lancers, but they were agents of the church. They were responsible to the church, and one day they would give an account of their work and stewardship to the church that had sent them out. The prayers and the material support followed them into every new field which they entered.

Proclaiming Christ and His salvation as they went, the missionaries made their way to Antioch in Pisidia, the central city in Asia Minor, and an important military and administrative center. On the very first Saturday after their arrival Paul and his associates were seated as strangers in the synagogue. There was something about these men that arrested attention. They were men of dignity, mien, and reverent demeanor. Observing them, the rulers thought such men must have a message worth hearing, so the

officers of the congregation invited Paul and his associates to give any word of exhortation they had for the people. Paul arose, waved his hand, which was both a Jewish characteristic and an oratorical gesture, and addressed his racial kindred in terms of profound respect. This incident shows us that opportunities for service come to those who put themselves in the way of them. Strangers in a city will find friends in the house of God.

At the close of the service, many requested that Paul address them again on the following Sabbath. There was a great hungering for the Word of life on the part of the believers. Those who decided to follow Christ were admonished to be true to their vows, and also to go forth and tell others what great things the Lord had done for them, and they did. Within two weeks Christianity was the talk of the city. Some were made glad by the message of the missionaries, and some were made mad. Some welcomed them and others wanted to kill them.

The Holy Spirit led at every turn on this missionary journey, and the people responded eagerly. In the face of hardship and disappointment Paul preached to the Jews in the synagogues, and when they rejected the gospel of Christ, the Gentiles heard it gladly. Today in many places in the world our missionaries are caught in a surge of nationalism, which often manifests itself in anti-American feeling and often in actual physical danger. But, thank God, the same power and protection are available to missionaries today that were available to Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. It is our responsibility and privilege to pray for the missionaries and the nationals with whom they work.

Dr. H. Earl Peacock of Brazil, General Coordinator for the forthcoming Crusade of the Americas, told this interesting story:

"One Sunday night I was invited to preach in one of the local churches in the city of Sao Paulo. The little church was packed with people. I arose to preach with a degree of apprehension, but soon this was gone as my heart was filled with the divine presence and power of the Holy Spirit. On the second stanza of the invitation hymn a man came forward, or I should say, what resembled a man. His hair was long, his face dirty, his clothes tattered and torn. He was a picture of degradation if I ever saw one. He gave the pastor his hand and said he would like to be a Christian. After the pastor had talked and prayed with him, the man with alcohol-laden breath said to me, "Pastor Henrique, God has saved me tonight." As I drove home, I wondered if it were possible for God to save him drunk as he was, mind befuddled by alcohol. Did he understand?

"A month later I returned to this church. The pastor said, "Do you know this man?" He is the same man who came forward the night you preached here."

"I could hardly believe my eyes. His hair was cut, his face shaved, his clothes clean. His wife and children were with him. His life was exemplary, the pastor said,"

Paul was right when he said the gospel is the power of God unto salvation for those who believe.

The superintendent of a Sunday School in Rio de Janeiro reported that nearly every church in Brazil has preaching points to which laymen go regularly to speak and to witness for Christ. In interior Brazil where there are few highways, members of the Tocantina Church in the state of Goias go by bicycle or cart, horse or muleback to reach the ten preaching points. In one month last year members of this church reported

a hundred and four decisions for Christ. God uses varied means to bring the gospel to men and sometimes people of little experience can give effective witness.

A radio ministry affords a wonderful opportunity for proclaiming the gospel of Christ, and it often proves an effective means of preparing the way for more direct presentation of it later. The First Baptist Church of Copacabana, Brazil, the only Baptist Church in a section of the city where close to a million people live, was having a revival. Each night the choir began the service by singing a rousing arrangement of "Blessed Assurance." One night in an apartment building nearby a housewife opened her window and listened. She turned to her husband and said, "I've just got to go hear more of that music; will you stay with the children?" At the close of the service the young lady received Christ as her Saviour and made a public acknowledgment of her faith in Him.

The Crusade hymn was sung at the Maracana stadium during a Brazilian evangelistic crusade. The 150,000 people sang at the close in a downpour of rain. Later that night at a gas station the attendant said: "You know, the funniest thing happened this afternoon. I was putting gas in a car and suddenly I heard beautiful singing. It seemed as if a heavenly choir was singing God's praises." He had heard the broadcast over the radio in that car.