



“Being a church that changes the world”

Acts 13-14

On Sunday the 22nd of February 2009 the word missional was first introduced to our church in this sermon.

In essence being “Missional” is a return to churching as portrayed in the book of Acts. Interesting the Epistles give few commands to evangelism because it would seem being on mission was the natural response to being in vital relationship with Jesus Christ. Today something of a reformation is transforming many evangelical Churches as they rediscover that the gospel is showcased by being on mission for Jesus or being a missional Church.

This sermon is published in the first instance for the members of Grace Evangelical Church - Newcastle, because it expounds biblical changes foundational to how we do Churching in the future as proposed by the leadership. It is offered to the wider church as a biblical starting point for missional churching in the 21st century.

Concluding the sermon is a short list of study questions and some suggested reading on missional churching

Grace Evangelical Church - Newcastle Inc www.gecn.org.au

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Let me remind you that Luke’s purpose in Acts is to show that Christ, who is now in heaven, is still working to build his church in the world. He has woven his account around the promise of **Christ in Acts 1:8**.

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

And what a marvelous story it has been as we have tracked through the first twelve chapters.

Just like a skimming stone causes a series of spreading ripples each time it touches the water, so the ripples of gospel change has touched down in Jerusalem and then in Judaea and then Samaria and even among the Gentiles in Antioch.

The most unlikely people have been used to see the most unlikely people converted and brought into Christ’s kingdom. What started in Jerusalem among Jews has now been shown to be big enough for the gentiles as well. But the question remains; who will take the gospel to the ends of the earth?

Chapter 13 is a turning point in the story as Luke zooms in on the church at Antioch. He wants us to see that this church changed the world. From this point, Jerusalem drops out of the story by and large.

But Luke wants us to see more than just a geographical shift of focus to Antioch. He wants us to see a new theological emphasis; a church based pattern for the task of getting the gospel to the ends of the earth. Luke wants us to see the church at Antioch as a **model of thinking and practice crucial to the development of the church generally**.

I want to highlight two distinct, but related aspects of the Antioch church. **First, they were clear about their identity as a church.**

The situation in the early church was changing rapidly. The church at Antioch, we are told in 11:19-30, [Act 11:19](#)

“Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians. Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

was obviously a young, rapidly growing congregation: thriving at the very time when there was savage persecution back in Jerusalem. How did they think of themselves?

They were **independent but not exclusive**. Look at **11:26**. The believers are called Christians for the first time. No longer are the believers defined by the Jewish faith centred in Jerusalem and by the ministries of Peter, James, John and Phillip.

This church sees themselves as followers and servants of Jesus. It was a strong independent congregation, established by non-Jewish Christians, **11:20**. In fact they were quite ethnically and culturally diverse, **13:1-2**. Their leaders included Simeon, a negro and Lucius, a North African and Manean, a relative of Herod, Barnabas, a Cypriot and Paul, a Jew from Cilicia.

But there is no sense of being exclusive. So, **11:23**, the believers gladly welcomed Barnabas from the Jerusalem church and benefited from his teaching. Likewise they gladly learned from Paul of the Christ they loved so dearly. And both these men joined this church and henceforth operated under its control.

And, **11:28**, they expressed their oneness in the gospel practically by deciding to send gifts of money to help their fellow Christians in Jerusalem during a time of drought.

They valued being taught and equipped. The church started with ordinary

evangelism from people that are not even named. However, they were delighted when Barnabas showed up and, [11:23-24](#), got great benefit and encouragement from his pastoral leadership.

Likewise, when Barnabas tracked down Paul and brought him into the church, presumably to teach these new Christians the background in Jewish history of the gospel and the finer points of the gospel message, they gladly embraced the opportunity to be resourced and equipped and in turn better able to speak to those around them about Jesus.

They were deliberately and prayerfully missional in outlook. Put simply, they were so excited by the gospel which had changed them from the inside out - brought them forgiveness and new relationship with God and new meaning and purpose in life - that it naturally flowed into a missionary vision.

They recognized as a church family unit that being Christ's people directly drafted them into Christ's purpose to get his gospel: the message of his salvation and lordship to the ends of the earth. And so, as a church family unit, and as individual Christians they were very conscious of being on mission for Jesus.

One result was that a great number were converted in the city of Antioch, the capital of the Roman province of Syria and in those days the third largest city in the world. Who knows what impact this had with the countless thousands of soldiers, merchants and travelers who passed through the city each day.

But even more deliberate was their determination to get the gospel out far beyond the bounds of their city - right to the ends of the earth.

Up to this time the gospel had moved to new areas because of persecution rather than by deliberate planning as happens here in Antioch as, [13:3](#), they take the initiative, as the Spirit works through them bringing them to a common determination as a church, to send out Paul and Barnabas to preach the gospel in Asia Minor.

In the context of God's word, being open to the leading of God's Spirit, knowing they had the resources, and extensive prayer seeking the Lord's leading and blessing on their thinking, they decided to enter this new work.

Friends, I am convinced that Luke wants us to see this church at Antioch as the pattern for the future advancement of the work in the early church, and also the pattern for you and me today as we continue the task of getting the gospel to our

city and to the ends of the earth.

Here is what we should be striving for at Grace. And what a wonderful thing it is. Here is what should grip us and drive us and claim our resources of time, energy and money. The question is: Does it?

Are you clear that we have a great deal of freedom to organize ourselves around God's word as a church without being limited by what other have done before us, even though we will be quick to learn from the good ideas and suggestions of others around us?

Are you clear that as Christians we have a direct responsibility to be on mission as Jesus is on mission to get his gospel out to everyone in Newcastle and the ends of the earth? Are you convinced that serving the Lord Jesus means not only personal obedience to his written word, but personal involvement in the task of mission?

Put it the other way round. If you as an individual, or us as a church unit, simply try to reproduce what others have done in gospel preaching or outreach; undervalue and ignore opportunities to learn and improve your understanding of the gospel and God's word as a whole; or refuse to be prayerful and determined in your attempts to get the gospel out individually and through the various projects of the church as a whole, then you are not clear about the basics of being a Christian and being a member of this church.

Second, because they were clear about their essential identity, they were clear in their determination to seek God's glory by making churches.

Chapters 13 & 14 is the record of Paul's first missionary journey, a two-year preaching trip around Asia Minor, modern day Turkey. Chris looked at some of the details of this trip last week as he spelled out Paul's evangelistic strategies.

But it is important to note that the church is at the heart of this whole episode, as it is at the heart of the whole of Acts.

Paul and Barnabas gladly and voluntarily submit themselves and their ministry to the local church at Antioch, when they of all people had every reason to do their own things having special commissions from the Lord.

It is the church which sends out Paul and Barnabas on their mission. And it is to the church they report at the end of their mission. And their task: to make churches throughout modern day Turkey. It appears, 14:23-26, that only when they were

satisfied that new converts were gathered in stable churches did they return to Antioch with a sense of their mission being completed.

The question is why? Why did Paul and Barnabas see the establishment of churches as a fundamental measure of the success of their preaching trip? I think there are two reasons why this was so important to the church at Antioch.

Because they wanted what God wants. Even though Acts is chock-a-block full of individuals being confronted by Christ through the gospel message and wonderful conversion stories it is the church that is at the heart of the story.

This is repeatedly seen in the language used. The emphasis is on “being added to their number”. Listen to the following verses. [2:41,47](#) ; [5:14](#) ; [6:1](#) ; [9:31](#) ; [16:5](#).

Luke wants us to understand that the Lordship of Christ, as he works from heaven to build his kingdom is seen primarily in the advancement of the church. And so, with God’s focus at heart the church at Antioch were not just interested in seeing ‘new Christians’ but ‘new Christian communities’.

Paul and Barnabas display that very concern. Not content with seeing people converted, they revisit these towns and cities to ensure that churches or proper communities of saved people have been formed. Why? Because that is the end point of God’s plan of salvation.

God gets glory through the church as it showcases people living obediently under his authority and word as we were originally created to do. The amazing work of the Lord in his world is seen not only in radically changed lives of individuals, but equally as saved people form a community organised by and dependent upon the Lord. Look at [14:22-24](#).

There will be a general commitment to God’s word, verse [22](#). There will be structures of pastoral oversight reflecting God’s order, verse [23](#). And there will be a real sense of dependence on the Lord expressed in prayerfulness for the very enabling and grace we need to be God’s people and which only the Lord can give.

The church is the centre of his attention, the whole of his affection, the apple of his eye. So it never has been enough and never will be enough for God simply to save people as if that is the end of the story. The real end of God’s work in the lives of people is that they are gathered into the new community of saved people, the church which is structured and organised to show clear dependency upon him.

Friends, **on the one hand** this exposes the terrible failure of much that is called gospel outreach these days. Much evangelism these days just focuses on getting people converted. Of course we must do that, but we must do much more.

We must work hard to see these converts properly integrated into solid churches that reflect God's order and show their need of continued grace. We must always impress on new Christians that being Christ's means being part of the new community of saved people with a responsibility to demonstrate the changing power of the gospel in new lifestyle and concerns both individually and together as a church family.

And **on the other hand** it means we must continue to be as concerned for the health and wellbeing of the existing church family as we are to see others converted and added to it. As the old saying goes, there is no point in bringing in the harvest if the barn is in disrepair.

And how often do we hear people stumble over being involved in the church, not over the challenge of Christ. I'm thankful that our church life and structures are consistent with the gospel we preach. But we need to be vigilant - broken relationships or individualism or sitting on the edge of church family life or personal sin really do compromise our gospel witness and will nullify our best evangelistic endeavours.

And because they knew nothing would bring greater glory to God. What was the result of churches being established throughout Asia Minor? Acts 14:23 People had put their trust in the Lord and were now entrusting themselves to his grace and care. In other words, great honour came to the Lord.

What happened in Antioch when Paul and Barnabas reported back to the church? **Verse 27**, we can imagine the prayers of thanksgiving and wonder at the Lord's miraculous workings.

What happened as a result of the church growing so amazingly in Jerusalem after some 3000 people were added to it? **Acts 2:47** They praised God, but even more than that their friends and neighbours who were watching all this saw such changed lives and attitudes and desires that they also were forced to acknowledge that God had done something special.

That's the very point Peter lays on believers at a later point. **1 Peter 2:12**. Live such good lives among the Pagans that even though they still totally reject the gospel they cannot help but acknowledge changed lives and consistent good deeds and so are forced to glorify God.

Ephesians 3:10 makes the point that the church shows the greatness and wisdom of God to the watching world. The church is where the watching world sees what God is like and sees the life-changing power of his gospel.

Is God's honour worth the emotional and financial cost of getting involved in the various ministries of the church? Is God's glory worth giving your energy and talents and time to building relationships with non-Christians at work or in your street - even when it means having to restrict your leisure time or what you might otherwise spend your money on?

Is God's honour worth taking the risk involved in challenging a friend or workmate with the message of Jesus or to study the bible with you or to do the Introducing God series? I'm so thankful that the answer of so many to these questions is YES! YES! But I also think there are not a few among us, who practically answer these questions with a loud NO!

We need to be careful because we easily allow the notion of churching to become routine and habitual and even at times a grind, something we have to do rather than something that brings God glory every time we meet. As a church we always demonstrate something - either we demonstrate God's goodness and grace in changing us from the inside out and forming us into a new community where the normal divisions of the world mean little - or we demonstrate that the gospel is all words and that we are no different from the world and that we are bored and disinterested in God, except when it is to our advantage.

Let's not settle for less than a desire to see God glorified when we meet together to read and pray and fellowship and hear his word. Let's be a church like Antioch, that will be known in history as one that changed the world as a result of our efforts to get the gospel out to those around us and by our life together being such a warm confirmation of the message we preach.

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Study Questions

1. Why is it critically important that we know our identity as a church?
2. What are the three essential ingredients of this identity named in the text and how can we strengthen our identity in light of them?
3. What are some of the stumbling blocks to us not understanding what a Christian is or being a member of the church?
4. “But we need to be vigilant - broken relationships or individualism or sitting on the edge of church family life or personal sin really do compromise our gospel witness and will nullify our best evangelistic endeavours.”

Discuss what practical ways can we help each other in the above obstacles to good churching?

5. “As a church we always demonstrate something - either we demonstrate God’s goodness and grace in changing us from the inside out and forming us into a new community where the normal divisions of the world mean little - or we demonstrate that the gospel is all words and that we are no different from the world and that we are bored and disinterested in God, except when it is to our advantage.”

Discussion practical ways in which we can change in these areas

Suggested Reading

Total Church

Out Growing the Ingrown Church - C John Miller

Promoting the Gospel - John Dickson

Spurgeon - Dalimore

Urban Harvest - Joy Joslin

God’s Mission and Ours - the challenge of
Telling the nations - Peter T Obrien -Editor

Let the Nations Be Glad - John Piper