

The Apostolic Pattern of Acts 13 (The Church in Antioch)

Introduction

I want to speak to you tonight out of a passage in Acts 13 so if you want to follow along I invite you to turn to that. I am grateful that we are recording it tonight because I want to touch a number of themes. And what I want to do is whet your appetite to study some of the themes in this passage. Tonight we are going to touch on a number of themes and each of them could be a session; we could design an entire conference or more around some of the key themes in this passage. However I just feel tonight to speak these themes into what the Lord is doing in Columbus to bring an awareness of them with a confidence that the Lord will bring out what He wants to bring out; and not just tonight but over the coming weeks and months and even years as you are laboring in this city.

I am going to give you a lot and I partially apologize for that but I believe that these are things the Lord wants spoken here and He wants spoken into the community. And I believe He Himself will unpack and unfold those themes tonight. I believe there are things the Lord wants to bring to our attention but I want to say this especially tonight I am in the mode of exhortation; I am not in any way rebuking. And so if you hear me bringing up a theme I am not making a statement about the way things are done. Okay? And so I am not saying that there is a deficiency in the way we do things but I am simply exhorting that there are some things I believe the Lord wants emphasized or added to the church. So please give me grace tonight to speak freely knowing that there is nothing in my heart that is a criticism of any kind; of the church in general or even the church in this city or anything else. I simply believe there are some things the Lord wants to highlight.

This chapter is Luke's record for us of the first apostolic sending in the New Testament. In it the Holy Spirit makes a statement, sets apart two apostolic vessels,

launches them out of a city and sets into motion the transformation of the nations of the Gentile world. There is something here that is essential to the church. There is something in this passage because God is a sending God. And by that I mean God advances the activity of the church through strategic sending. He did it in the Old Testament. When He needed to deliver Israel; He sent Moses. It is a biblical pattern and the sent ones are not in any way superior to those not sent; it is simply a function that necessarily must exist in the church for specific breakthroughs and seasons of time.

The ministry of one sent and one not sent in the same way are equally important. The apostle Paul had to be sent to unlock the Gentile world; to open it up to the gospel. However even as Paul was sent he was setting in place men and women and giving them leadership because if they did not take leadership and steward the work of God in that city what he sowed and labored for would not have borne fruit.

And so I just want to say clearly at the beginning the issue is not that a sent vessel is preeminent, more important than or more necessary than another vessel. *But we do need sent vessels.* When God sets apart certain men and women to release breakthroughs in regions; He even sets apart cities to release breakthroughs in regions.

The gospel had already gone to the Gentiles before Acts 13. You may remember that God came to Peter and gave him a vision and Peter went to preach the gospel to a Roman soldier named Cornelius. The Holy Spirit fell and Romans began to embrace the gospel. Philip preached to the Ethiopian eunuch—a Gentile—and he embraced the gospel. And so it is not that the Gentiles had not yet embraced the gospel; there was a slow expansion of the gospel happening among the gentiles for about ten years before this event that Luke records takes place.

The gospel was slowly expanding but what happened in Antioch set something into motion that unlocked the Gentile world and within about fifty years there were a million Gentile converts in the pagan Roman empire; in other words something suddenly accelerated because of what the Lord did in a city and this created a launching

pad for two men to open up a region to the gospel. We want to understand what happened here because it gives us some essential patterns that God has established in the church.

Those essential patterns form a necessary part of the gospel enterprise but as we examine it, I do not want us to somehow put sending on a pedestal. If you remember there were five established leaders in the church of which two were sent and three needed to remain in Antioch to steward the work of God.

Paul had a gift on him to break open regions for the gospel. Romans 15 he said "My ambition or my call is to preach where it has not been preached." However, Paul turned and looked at men like Timothy and said "Would you go where I preached and labor to establish the church and set it in place." And so do not set the apostolic gifts at odds with other gifts in the body but recognize we need to have a contending for apostolic sending but that sending must come out of the establishment of the local church. If there had not been a church in Antioch there would not have been an apostolic ministry; there would not have been apostolic formation or preparation and there would not have been apostolic sending. Paul did not just get launched on his own; he was set in a community and in a church in which he labored in, gave himself to, was formed in and was launched out of.

There is always a danger that we become enamored with certain redemptive callings and we need to recognize the grace of God on all of the callings He gives in the church and not set one against another. With that in mind let me say this: when we set a context where laborers can be formed and sent *a sent laborer changes everything*. A man or a woman sent at the direction, initiation and anointing of the Holy Spirit brings a radical transformation. Again, once Paul was launched within fifty years there were a million Gentile converts in a pagan empire.

Paul could not have established the church in the Roman Empire on his own, but Paul had an anointing to break open a region and create a space where other laborers

could take their place. There was an interdependence in the gifts in the body. Until Paul broke open the region there were men and women at Ephesus with nothing to steward for the sake of the gospel but once Paul did break open the region, they had to take their place of leadership in the church or would not be established and formed.

If it took apostolic sending to break open and advance the gospel in the Roman empire how much more will it take apostolic sending to open up the hardest and darkest places in the earth the closer we get to the end of the age? The final mission fields will be regions that have resisted the gospel not for a few years but centuries, even for millenniums. The church is speaking more and more about the glory of the gospel reaching unreached peoples, but the gospel is not going to go into the very hardest places in the earth and bear fruit without apostolic sending.

I appreciate the volunteer spirit of men and women wanting to go. I believe that is an expression of the grace of God and the Lord is putting this on the hearts of His people. With that volunteer spirit we need to create context for formation in the church to set the stage for apostolic sending so that laborers who are sent bear fruit under the power and anointing of the Holy Spirit.

Paul–The Apostolic Example

Notice there are only two men that the New Testament that directly calls us to imitate; the ultimate one of course is the man Christ Jesus–He is the one we want to imitate--but the scripture also boldly tells us to imitate the apostle Paul. That is some kind of hutzpah we could say or something when a man can look at the church and say “Follow me” without any arrogance, but Paul did it. He did not say, “Follow me because I know you will give me an offering. Follow me because I know it will make my ministry more prominent.” He said, “Follow me because when you follow me and imitate me it will form you into the likeness of Christ.”

The fact that the Bible instructs us to imitate Paul tells us that this apostolic man is not just an enigma in history, but he is a model of a messenger that we are to study and even to follow. I will say it another way; if we are not imitating the apostle Paul we are not being fully obedient to the scripture. I am not saying we are being rebellious but we are coming up short of something in the grace of God when we do not also imitate Paul.

You cannot understand Paul without understanding Antioch because Antioch is the city from which he was launched. Not only was he launched out of the city, more specifically, he was launched out of that church. In our generation we have an infatuation with movements and movements are good in the grace of God but movements are released by God for the establishment of the church.

I am not sure we have the apostolic value for the church. Paul was brought to Antioch and he was there for a year before his sending; Barnabas was there eight years before his sending. This tells us there was something in that church God wanted invested into those messengers before He was willing to send them. You cannot understand Paul without Antioch because in a sense God sent Paul and Barnabas to take what was in the church in Antioch and thrust it into the nations. Out of the five leaders highlighted in Acts 13, God sent two to take what this leadership team had labored for and what had been formed and fashioned in that church and export it to other cities. We have a God-ordained instruction to imitate Paul but to imitate Paul we have to understand the church out of which he was formed and launched. Therefore we should study the church in Antioch.

The City of Antioch

The city of Antioch was a regional city. It was formed by a wicked man who led the Seleucid empire and named the city after himself. At one time the city was one of the top three cities in the entire Roman empire in terms of population. It was founded at the center of key trade routes and also had commercial significance. We need to change the way we think of cities like Antioch. We tend to think that Antioch was a useful city for

the expansion of the gospel because of where it was located, but this thinking is a bit backwards. I would say instead that God had the city established because He needed a city for the proclamation of the gospel. Does that make sense? The mystery of God is that He is directing history for His purposes and utilizing people who do not even know Him. In other words a wicked man thought he would build a city for His glory but God used that man to establish a regional city so that the apostolic ministry could be launched from that place.

We need to recover a sense of the sovereignty of God over the affairs of men. When God confronted Pharaoh He essentially said, "Look I raised you up to demonstrate My glory." Pharaoh though he raised himself up, but God used Pharaoh for His glory. The movements of Pharaoh's heart may have been wicked, but God raised him up and what Pharaoh did was ultimately what God wanted him to do (Romans 9:17).

We need to recover this. A wicked emperor built the city of Antioch to to make his name great but God directed Him to build the city because He needed a city for the sake of the gospel. We need to shift this thinking because once we shift this thinking we will begin asking the prophetic question, "God why did you establish my city?" instead of wondering if there is anything in our cities useful to God.

Perhaps you should ask, "God why have You, in Your wisdom put the largest college campus in America at my back door? Why are some of the largest communities of certain people groups at my back door?" Is that just a random thing that we need to figure out how to leverage for the gospel? Or is this a God-ordained direction of human history for the establishment of something in this city?"

I have Bible verses. What does the book of Acts say? God sets the boundaries of nations so that they will grope for God (Acts 17:26-27). Maybe He even set the boundaries of college campuses so that twenty year olds will grope for God. God really is driving history to His own intended outcome. Perhaps wicked men really do God's bidding at the end of the day. Though they resist, they cannot help it but why? Because

the Master Potter says, "I made the vessel for My glory so you can fight but you will end up creating the context for My glory." (Romans 9:19-24) God forms cities and vessels for His glory. And you should be asking the prophetic question, "What is the purpose of the unique characteristics of my city in the grace of God." Knowing God directs cities and history, we should ask why certain things have happened.

The Prototype Church in the Nations

To understand Antioch we have to understand what scholars call "the law of first mention." It is the idea that the first time something is mentioned—whether a person or a redemptive theme—it reveals the essential element of that thing as well as a prophetic picture of what that thing will become. For example when Adam and Eve fall, God makes a declaration in Genesis 3:15, "The seed of the woman is coming to crush the seed of the serpent." This is the first mention of a Messiah who is coming and it predicts His essence. He will be the "seed of the woman" which is a strange phrase that indicates God has a deliverer coming who is going to be born in a supernatural way. What is that deliverer going to do? Well his heel is going to get bruised in conflict with the serpent but that bruised heel is going to crush the serpent. Again, this is also a strange phrase but it is a prophecy that will become graphically true.

When the Bible first mentions things, it is telling us here is the essence of the thing and gives us a prophetic picture of where it is going. Antioch is the first church in the nations highlighted in the New Testament. It answers a question that will become very important by the end of the New Testament: What does the people of God look like outside of Jerusalem? Remember when Acts 2 happened, the Holy Spirit fell, what we now call the church began to form, it was based in Jerusalem under Jewish apostles and Jewish leaders who the Lord set in place.

However something was coming—the gospel was going to break out of Jerusalem and into the nations. Something else was also coming: Jerusalem was going to encounter a great catastrophe and so the great question in the New Testament is what

does the church—or we could say the people of God—look like in the nations? What does the church look like apart from the uniqueness of Jerusalem?

When persecution began, it set into motion the dispersion of Jewish believers that begin to come up to Antioch. In Antioch Gentiles begin responding to the faith in large numbers and a community was established. I believe that this is where Paul first got the revelation or the insight of what he calls the “one new man” which he refers to as the “mystery” of his gospel (Ephesians 3:6). The mystery is that God can take human beings from separate people groups and make them one people while they yet retain the distinctions of their people groups and together become more than they could become apart.

And I will just say as a side-note this is why issues of racial conflict and racial tension are not a small issue. They are divine tests that reveal if the church has overcome and can demonstrate the grace of God. Racial tensions are a tool of the enemy to rage against the very mystery of the gospel. There is a lot that could be said on that even though it is not our subject tonight. It even affects the redemption and provocation of Israel. Paul encountered this church in Antioch where Jew and Gentile are gathering together in mutual love and mutual submission as one body, and what is happening at Antioch becomes the prototype of what the people of God are to look like in the nations.

Luke tells us it is also the city where the followers of Jesus are first called Christians. That is not an accidental thing. The identity of this new movement is being formed. Paul and Barnabas were formed in the church where this identity was established because they are going to take what was formed in Antioch and preach it in the nations. This is why Paul was sent there. He had to be sent out of this prototype church.

Antioch is not only a prototype, it is also a prophetic picture—remember the “Law of First Mention?” Antioch is a prophetic picture of what the people of God look like outside of Jerusalem. The church begins also is a picture of the way it will end. In other

words there are patterns and prototypes here that help us understand not just how the church began but how it is going to end up. The Lord is going to bring it full circle. This is how the church began in the nations but it is also how the church will end in the nations. This is how the church transitioned in a sense from Jerusalem into the nations and it is how the church in the end will transition from the nations back into Jerusalem for the return of the King who will dwell in that city again.

There is something prophetic connected to that city. In the same way, we want to recognize the the issues of calling and election over cities and over individuals. We want to steward those callings because when cities and individuals come into their calling it catapults the church forward.. When the gospel took root in Antioch it formed a catapult that launched an apostolic movement. Every city in the Mediterranean basin did not have that calling, but every city could benefit from that calling. Antioch was not some sort of unique version of church—it was simply an authentic demonstration of God that God wanted duplicated into the cities surrounding Antioch.

The Church—The Foundation of Sending

Let's look at Acts 13:1 and pull some themes out of these passages. In Acts 13:1, Luke tells us, "Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who is called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a life-long friend of Herod the tetrarch and Saul." There is so much we could say of these verses and of these men. I cannot take it up tonight but notice the way the Lord assembled men from various regions, ethnicities and cultures—that is a statement. That is part of God's statement that this is the prototype church. He has gathered the nations here; it is not just well here are the Greeks who live in Antioch. The leaders are not even all from the city.

Notice the first phrase that Luke gives us. He says, "They were were in the church." They were not just in the city. They were not just some guys who were friends. They were men together in the church. So often in our search for something big or grandiose we miss the fact that the church is really the center of action. Movements can be awesome

and can be God-ordained. Conferences can be leveraged by God but if those things do not build the church they miss the very thing that the Lord Himself has established.

We should not despise movements with the grace and gifts of God on them, but those things have to build the church. We need to call the people of God back to a value for the church because people are wanting to run and go and do things but not necessarily build the church. I am so grateful that people are saying "I want to labor for the gospel" and, "I am willing to go places for the gospel," but if you are not willing to be formed in the place of the church what is it you are wanting to go and reproduce?

Are we simply looking for conferences or weekend seminars? These can be helpful, but if that weekend seminar does not build the church quite frankly it is not what Jesus died for. We tend to want to produce meetings—which can be valuable in the grace of God—but are we willing for the labor to produce the church?

If we are not willing to be formed in the church how then are we going to produce the church? I value the language of "we want to do church planting" but I would ask, "Well have you been formed in the church?" I am not talking about some artificial timeline or some set of rules. I am just asking is that your DNA? Is it in your DNA? If it is not then what are you going to be producing—what is it you want to form and fashion?

The Temptation of Fake Intimacy

The temptation in an online generation is fake intimacy and this threatens the church. In the crudest forms we have pornography which offers us fake intimacy via technology. It is not the real thing but it masquerades as intimacy and therefore gives some sort of deceptive illusion. However that is not the totality of fake intimacy.

A lot of us are following people on Facebook and Instagram that we think we know but in reality we do not. We even follow public personalities and for some reason we think we know them because we have seen a picture of their latte or their closet or perhaps ten other things they should have never photographed. Why should we even

be obsessed with what another person does; and honestly to the point of idolatry? Because our phones are constantly buzzing with pictures and messages we have this assumption of intimacy and relationship. However, for many of us we may feel connected to hundreds or more people and the truth is we barely know them. Some of them we have never talked to. We have no idea what things most of them are wrestling with because the truth is we only know them through social media which is mostly only an advertisement of who they want to be. In the same way, they only know us via our online advertisements on social media.

The truth is Instagram probably puts up more walls around real relationships than we imagine. Now, I do not care if you do Instagram, and I do not care if you follow your friends. However, there is a temptation to posts on Instagram that mostly say, "Look at my awesome life" and it is not even real. No one posts on Instagram, "I woke up a little depressed this morning, and I am not sure of the promises of God," but that is intensely biblical. The greatest King of Israel assembled about one hundred and fifty songs most of which start with "Lord, I am a little depressed and need You to help me out." I mean God Himself at the point of His own suffering said, "Father can You let this pass from Me?" He was felling the weight of the pressure of the moment.

We have this allusion that to be apostolic—or whatever you want to use because I know that is a loaded word in our culture—is to be strong and awesome. When the reality is to be weak is actually probably more useful. Paul had to be emptied of his strength and intellect; it was not his intellect that advanced the gospel among the Gentiles. The Gentiles did not care that he could quote Hebrew verses and debate with Gamaliel. What did Paul say to the people in Corinth? "I determined not to come impress you. I came to stand before you in weakness because that creates a context for power of God to do something inside of the people." (1 Corinthians 2:3-5)

Paul's weakness gave people the courage to embrace the gospel. If I come in strength as the "awesome messenger of God" what hope does that give you? If Paul

could perform on a platform what does that ultimately do for the people? However if you see me in front of you and weak that gives tremendous hope that God can use anyone. Paul was the preeminent apostolic messenger and he wrote things like, "You all say that I write strong letters but I am not as impressive when I show up." (2 Corinthians 10:10) There are probably people in this room who probably have more likes on Facebook that Paul would have had. Paul's podcast might not have had as many followers as we think it did and yet he was an apostolic leader who broke open regions for the gospel.

There is something to this plastic front that we put up in front of others. I am not saying that in an attempt at humility we should publicly post every weakness or struggle, but do you have authentic relationships in the context of the church? Or are they "plastic relationships?" If someone took your phone away for a week you would feel pretty lonely, isolated, and depressed? I am not telling you that your phone is wrong; I have no statement about that. I enjoy that I can be in another city and make a call to my daughters and that I have friends on the other side of the planet I can interact with. I am grateful for that. Technology is a tool that can facilitate relationship at some level relationship, but it cannot produce authentic relationship on its own.

The people I have the best communication with using technology are the people who I have been forged relationship with face to face. The technology is not the basis of our relationship. It is merely a tool that allows us to continue the conversation when we are not face to face. Does that make sense? I am not saying do not message your wife but what I am saying is if all you do is message your wife but you are not in the context of relationship with her in the context of your home; then is not authentic. I am not saying do not message your pastor or a friend but I am saying we must have substantial, tangible, real relationships. These relationships should be forged in the context of the church and this is why the church is more than showing up on Sunday.

We need to beware of the illusion of fake intimacy because we need true relationship in the context of the church to forge apostolic vessels. Without this we are going to produce plastic presentations of what we think it means to be successful in our culture and that does not ultimately benefit the church. We need each other at a very deep level. The most gifted man in this room needs everyone at a deep level. He needs someone to call him out every now and then who will say, "You know what—you are not as awesome as you think." We need to turn to a friend and say, "I do not care how well you lead worship—though I'm grateful for the grace of God given to you for leading—what is happening with you and your wife?" Or we ask, "What is happening with your son?" Not in an accusatory way but in a way of formation where we genuinely care about others in our midst and we labor together to come to maturity. The church is a place where our weaknesses, our strengths, our relationships, even our failures, and our celebrations are mutually strengthened and enjoyed.

If you want apostolic sending it requires the context of the church. It has to happen in the context of the church. Why? Because the apostolic man or woman is called to establish the church. If I build a house, I do not want someone building my foundation who has never build a foundation. I may let him try it out on your house first, but not mine. I do not want a guy who has never built a foundation laying the foundation for my house. If we are going to send vessels who are not yet skilled in laying foundations into another city in our nation or even another nation to lay foundations, we are fooling ourselves.

Prophets and Teachers—Foundational Gifts

Luke records the most astounding thing about these men in Antioch: they were prophets and teachers. Why when God wanted to establish the church in the nations did He select apostles from prophets and teachers? This is not a statement of value related to evangelism and pastoral ministry. However there is something foundational here for establishing the church.

Why selected among the prophets? I believe the hint is given for us in Revelation 19:10 where the angel tells John, "The testimony of Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy." The church is established in a region in order to give a testimony of Jesus. The people formed in the church give a testimony of Jesus in flesh and blood. Therefore the church must have a prophetic spirit. It must have a prophetic foundation.

Prophecy is actually not primarily about your future; it is primarily about His—meaning Jesus. We have a definition of the gift of prophecy which is incomplete. I appreciate gifts of prophecy and words of knowledge. I need them because they bring courage and strength to my life, but the gift of prophecy exists in the church primarily to release a witness of Jesus. It's primarily purpose is not to predict next week's headlines. This does not mean we despise the predictive gift of prophecy, but there needs to be an expansion of our understanding that prophecy exists—according to the word of God—to release a witness about Jesus.

Notice that John did not summarize the purpose of prophecy as revealing the details about the coming Antichrist—though we should study that because it was given to us as Scripture. John said that prophecy primarily exists to release a witness about Jesus. Furthermore the context of Revelation 19:10 also contains a profound warning for us. John had been given profound prophecies about the things to come and no doubt he was overwhelmed. As the angel revealed things to come to John, John was enamored with the glory of the angel and John tells us, "Then I fell down at his feet to worship him and he said to me, 'You must not do that because I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit—or unction—of prophecy.'"

Because of the intensity of the prophetic encounter, John was tempted to worship the angel, but the angel gave him a serious warning. Essentially the angels said, "John I have showed you things to come, you are enamored with my giftedness and my

appearance and the thing on me so now you are tempted to worship me.” As a result the angel rebuked John.

I want to say this if the function of prophecy leaves us more enamored with the messenger than Jesus something is off—massively off. Something is off either in the prophet—who could be delivering the word for his own accolades most likely because of insecurity in his own soul—or because there is something off in us also probably due to an insecurity in our own soul. When we become enamored with the messenger, it forms an unhealthy attachment to a vessel, a messenger, a worship leader, a whatever, a pastor or whoever.

If we become enamored with a messenger over and above the Son of God something is off in the gift of prophecy. I am sad to say, I think more often than not we are enamored treating prophets as if they are superhuman creatures when in reality they are nothing more or less than a pastor or evangelist or anything else in the church. Just because their gift seems a little bit more spectacular does not mean that the vessel possessing that gift is something spectacular.

If they are a true prophet they are probably the least of the saints in many ways because God has had to break them down. Most of the prophetic men and women in the scripture were that way. The one that called down fire in front of false prophets, the one we call Elijah, was running away from a woman a few verses later. I do not want to disparage him or his weakness. It is simply the weakness of the human frame. We can become easily enamored with the prophetic ministry, but the prophetic ministry exists to release a witness in the earth about Jesus because this is the foundational task of the church.

I like to say the church is like an embassy in the earth that points to another kingdom. For example, I know some of you are going to Israel and Israel is a country—“a kingdom”—a long way away. However, if I go to Washington and I step into Israel’s

embassy everything changes because it gives the sense of being in that country though it is not the fullness of that country.

I have been in an Israeli embassy and when you enter everything changes. All of a sudden the culture changes and the language changes; now people are speaking Hebrew and everything is different. A person can seek shelter in an embassy for years., because it is legally the outpost of another kingdom.

When the people in your city step into your church they are stepping into a territory that belongs to another kingdom and they should suddenly encounter a different culture, a different language, and a different people who are the ultimate statement of a different kingdom. The church is a prophetic statement that what is going on within our walls is going to fill the earth at some point. Yes there is the future dimension of Jesus' kingdom but there is a present demonstration in the church. It is limited until He comes, but it is substantial, it is real, and it is transformative. Furthermore, it is God's statement to the powers and principalities; a subject I wish I could touch on. Ephesians 3:10 says "It is the church through whom God makes a statement to the powers and principalities."

Because the church itself is a witness of Jesus in the earth, it must be established by men and women that the Bible would call prophets. Our challenge is that we have an incomplete view of prophecy. There is a predictive gift that the Lord gives but the gift of prophecy is much larger than the predictive gift. When you read the biblical prophets they have soaked themselves in the word of God and in their prophecies they are applied the word of God to the present situation of the nation. I am not saying God did not speak through them—He did—but He spoke through men and women soaked in the word of God.

For example, the prophet Daniel said things like "This judgment I have observed, it is everything that was written in Your law." In Daniel 9 he observed that the things written by Moses had come upon the nations. Daniel was applying Bible verses to his situation,

his context and his generation. The primary calling of a prophetic man is to take Bible verses and in the grace of God apply them to our current situation. That is one of the reasons apostles must also be teachers. They must have soaked themselves in the word of God. We are trying to teach men and women to be prophetic but too often we neglect the foundation of the prophetic which is the word of God.

Jesus is a pretty good judge of character and he said no other prophet was greater than John the Baptist. That is a profound statement for a man that lived in the wilderness who never really got out much. He did not do any miracles like Moses. In fact, John the apostle said he did no miraculous signs. He did not add to the grand prophetic oracles Isaiah gave us. John the Baptist—the prophet that no other prophet superseded—primarily did one thing: he spoke the word of God under the unction of the Holy Spirit.

Every sermon fragment we have from John is a portion of Scripture. You can hear the words of Isaiah or Malachi in John's preaching. I hesitate to say he was the greatest prophet because we do not know how to evaluate properly, but Jesus said no one had gone past him; in other words whatever the greatest is he is in that club. However he made no predictions; he did not call down fire; he simply spoke the words of Isaiah under the unction of the God who gave Isaiah his words. This alone made John a prophet to the nation—a prophet without equal in a sense.

We need to recover this as the essence of the prophetic gift and I believe that this is one reason why Paul and Barnabas were teachers—which means they had given themselves to the word of God. When a prophet soaks themselves in the Word of God, the Holy Spirit has something to work with when He wants to speak through them to the nation.

The Holy Spirit really likes the words He has given the church in the Word of God. They are not out of date. The word of God is timeless and eternal and He loves to speak through it. Jesus said, "The prophets prophesied.... until now!" In other words there is an eternity of the prophetic words in Scripture given before Jesus came. The main

corpus of prophetic proclamation was given before Jesus even came and it is to be spoken again with unction in the way that John did.

Prophets must be teachers because the primary function of a New Testament prophet is to make the community prophetic. In the Old Testament the people would go find the prophet to get an answer. However, the New Testament church sits under the ministry of the prophet to awaken the prophetic gift of the Holy Spirit in the members of the church. There are measures and expressions that may vary between individuals, but there is to be a prophetic unction in the church.

The gifts in the church are to reproduce that in the church. The pastor is to produce a people who pastor in the church. The evangelist is to provoke the people to evangelize. However quite honestly it is easier for us to pay the man of God to do the function instead of receive from the man of God and then do the hard work of expressing that gift as well to whatever degree the Lord has given us.

The Lord does release gifts in dimensions and some of us will not be as strong in a gift, but we are called to receive from the ones God has gifted so that we might be strengthened and operate in that gift. We are not just called to hire professionals to do it for us. We're not simply called to pay the prophet to come prophesy. Those the Lord has set apart in the congregation as prophetic vessels are called to impart that prophetic spirit to the church so that when you go to the office you are now prophetic in your posture. So that when you hear the political noise and the silent call of Nationalism in your nations you have a prophetic spirit to navigate to stay true to the gospel and to not be caught up. And so these men had to be teachers both soaked in the word of God and able to impart something of who they were into the body of Christ.

And I just want to say this that those of us who desire to operate in the prophetic gift often look for three or four shortcuts to 'activate' that gift. I do not have any criticism for the laying on of hands or praying for the prophetic gift or anything like that but in order to see a biblical prophetic gift function in the church we need to begin by soaking men

and women in the Scripture. I would even say this for those who may have a prophetic gifting when the temptation comes to say “Well I have a prophetic gifting, I do not need the instruction because the Holy Spirit will tell me.” I will say this, there are things the Holy Spirit will not tell you because we are not made to be islands with a spirit of superiority. There are things that will be hidden from you so you do sit and listen to gifts of teaching and instruction and pastoring and things like that.

When we make our self an island or the congregation gets enamored with our gift and makes us an island disasters will come. And I will go one step further and say how many moral failures may have existed in men of God in which we may have played a part? Yes, they bear their responsibility before God but, because human beings were never designed to be worshipped any time you worship them it goes badly—even for spiritually gifted vessels.

Whether it is LeBron James or your favorite minister we do not have capacity to be worshipped; it will always go badly. This is why human beings who are worshipped are such a disaster and usually can barely hold together their marriages, usually have dysfunctional families, fall prey to substance abuse, and all sorts of things. We are not designed to be worshipped. I am not excusing individual sin, but I am asking us what role we sometimes play in worshipping men and women in a way that is not godly and sets them up for failure. I am not talking about proper respect and honor and appreciation, you realize that but there is a lot of idolatry that happens.

Ministry to God—The Foundational Ministry of the Church

In verse number 2 it says, “While they were ministering or worshipping the Lord in fasting the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work which I have called them.’” There is a lot that we could say but scholar David Peterson says this in his commentary on Acts:

“Since the Lord Himself is the object of service and ministry here Luke may be suggesting that corporate prayer is the new activity that replaces the sacrificial system that was at the heart of Judaism.”

Now I am not fighting for what that expression looks like but what this tells us is that there is an essential pattern of ministry to the Lord that is intended to be at the center of church. This word here ‘worshipping’ is the word that is used for the priestly ministry of Israel. Remember we said Antioch is the prototype and here is what the people of God look like in the nations; not in Jerusalem but in the nations. What do they look like? They did not have an altar to do sacrifices although sacrifices were still happening at this point. And sacrifices were not condemned by the apostles—you remember they worshipped around that expression while it was still there; though they of course had the full revelation of Jesus.

What does worship look like in the nations? Luke tells us that the leaders here gather in the context of ministry to the Lord. In other words God did not redefine everything, He simply shifted the context. Ministry to the Lord was still central (Matthew 22:34-38).

The church is not a people without priests; it is a community of priests. There is something to the foundation of the church being established in the place of ministry to the Lord. The expressions can vary, so we are not to fight for an expression. I believe that is why Luke did not give us details of the expression. However he did say there is a God-centeredness.

I will even say this: in God’s kindness He will not allow the church to come to maturity apart from a prayer culture. Why? Because if He does it leaves us confident in ourselves; prayerlessness abounds when we get confident in our ability. It is an indication that we have lost our sense of dependence. It is an indication that we have moved towards man-centeredness. Man-centeredness can be “It is all about me!” but

man-centeredness can also be “We can do it.” “We can do what You have asked us to do.” And the Lord says to us, “No, you cannot do what I have asked you to do.”

There is something that must be established in the church to bring the church to maturity. God is not activity-based in the way we are. He is far more interested in who we are than what we do. Understand the fullness of what I am saying. I am not neglecting obedience and the need for fruitfulness but too often we are focused on we do and He is focused on who we are? Paul said “My joy in the church is that you will be compatible to Jesus when you see Him; that is what I am working for.” Is that not interesting?

Notice here that five men ministering to the Lord changed world history. We need a fresh value for small prayer meetings. Sometimes we feel like it is not effective unless there is a thousand people in the room. However, the effectiveness of prayer depends on who we think we are speaking to. If at the end of the day we are trying to get each other going then yes, the bigger crowd helps. And I am not saying that there is not a dimension of power and unity when we gather. However when we have no value for the gathering of the saints if it is not large then we have lost sight of the fact that we only need five guys or gals to get ahold of God to actually change world history.

The power of the prayer meeting is in who we are talking to and when that happens history gets shifted. There is a spirit of unity and a strengthening when large gatherings happen but do we value that above the regular prayer meetings in the church that might sometimes only be five of us in the room? Do we realize that if five of us get ahold of God it could change world history?

The Spirit’s Leadership of the Missions Movement

It is significant that the Spirit spoke while they were ministering to the Lord. We tend to think there is a crisis in the nations relating to evangelism so we plan to have a committee meeting and form a missions strategy. I am not saying that is a bad thing, but do we also stand before the Lord and say “Here is our best strategy but what do You

want to do?" I am not saying that there is not a union of the Spirit's leadership and human initiative so I am not speaking in a criticism but I do think it is significant in light of Matthew 9:38. Jesus was burdened for the nations and He said, "I see a massive harvest." Now if we had that burden, the next thing we would say is, "Therefore who will go!" However that is not at all what Jesus said. He said, "I see a massive harvest would you stand before Me and ask Me to thrust forth men and women with apostolic power into the nations?"

I do not have a rebuke in my spirit so I am not criticizing mobilizers for missions but I do want to say that in the midst of our mobilization I do think it is significant that Jesus' instruction in Matthew 9 was essentially, "Are you really burdened? Then stand in intercession and ask Me to direct My church." I will go even further, not in every case—this is not a universal statement—but in some cases we have sent messengers in our zeal who are ill-equipped and they have suffered greatly for it and the church was not advanced in the process.

Because of our culture in some cases we have gone into regions of the earth as the savior of that region. We have been subtly convinced that the position we may occupy among the nations in terms of economics or other things somehow equips us to be the deliverer of a region. As if we have something in and of ourselves because of our culture, our nation or our economics or education or something else which will deliver the nations from darkness. I am not saying do not leverage the benefits we have available but the earth is not going to open up to the gospel without a Holy Spirit sending and unction.

I will take a risk of being misunderstood and ask have you noticed that the apostle Paul, who had a great zeal for apostolic missions, did not recruit people from his circle of influence to go do it? Instead he set apart vessels to build and labor to establish the church. And he was a man with the burning soul for missions. He was the man that said,

"I cannot stay here because there is a pastor here to lead; let him establish the church. I need to go somewhere where there is nothing." (Romans 15:20-21)

Paul did not write in any of his letters saying "Come join me on an apostolic journey." He had a burden that drove him to missions and even to the place of deep suffering for missions—that is how you know you have a burden when you let people beat you for it. However as a burdened man he said, "Establish apostolic communities in the nations" rather than recruit for frontier missions. Why? Why did he not give that missionary call? I am not saying that it is wrong to give that call; please do not misinterpret me. I believe Paul had confidence that as men and women of God established communities in the presence of God, that prioritized ministry to God, and yielded to the Holy Spirit that God Himself would thrust forth labors with power.

Paul had a confidence that the Holy Spirit knows how to form a man or a woman and send them. We need that confidence. I do fear that if we do not recover that confidence the Lord may resist us. What do I mean by that? I mean He may put us in situations of fruitlessness, where we hit brick wall and He says, "You are going to hit brick walls until we get this thing in order. I appreciate your willingness and your sacrifice now but now gather in the right posture and allow me to lead the movement because you are not the answer to the needs of the nations—I am."

Apostolic Formation

Messengers anointed with power are a part of God's answer to the nations but interceding for power—which is biblical—is the secondary thing. The primary thing is to allow God make to make you into what He wants you to be. There are some people and some of us for whom the Lord is withholding His power for our own good. He is saying to us, "You would blow up! I love you too much. You would be a disaster and out of my mercy, I am going to restrain some things."

And along those lines I would say there is a genuine longing and desire in some of you and you are saying, "Why has He not given me the power?" Or whatever you have been asking for. I do not want you to overanalyze it but I might be speaking to some of you in the room that He may be saying to you, "If you will stay in this place for ten or fifteen years you are going to get what you ask for." I think that is a word to some of you. You are discouraged because six months or intercession or even the forty-day fast did not lead to breakthrough. You feel weaker than ever, but He says to you, "Now we are making progress."

There is an illusion and a deception of human strength that needs to be broken and until it is broken we are not going to see apostolic sending on the level that God intends. You may ask, "Where is the thing I asked You for, for a decade?" And the Lord says, "Sorry I will be it in another decade, but you hang in there. Stay steady." Truthfully in some cases if the Lord told us how long it would take to be formed we would have given up. It is true. I am not sure Moses would have signed up. I mean that was eighty years in total; that is a long time. Our culture has a glorification of youth that is not entirely biblical.

I am not saying do not let young adults express their ministry callings and operate in their gifts, but there is a dimension of formation that must take place. We should not create rules that say, "Until you are fifty you cannot do anything" like some cultures have. However there is a process and some of you are thinking, "I have asked for that thing for twenty years" and the Lord is saying "Stay in there" because what you are asking to be what the Bible would call a deliverer. A deliverer is very different from wanting to do a few things here and there for God. God is asking, "Do you really want to unlock nations? Do you know what I am going to have to do to you to get you in a place where it does not blow you up?" Moses at forty would have been a disaster with the power that he got by the end of his life. If he could have called down plagues on Egypt at forty it would have been a disaster. As it were at eighty he stumbled a few times in significant

ways. I think the stories of Moses are meant to encourage us. Even after moving in power he was still very human.

God so enjoys who you are in your assignment that you notice that God was willing to leave Israel in bondage for forty years to wait on Moses. Now I do not know how that works because real people died during those forty years, but there is something in the grace of God that caused Him to stay committed to a broken, depressed man and wait the four decades for him to mature. God would not move on without Moses.

This is what some of you are asking for but you are a little upset because you are thinking, "Man, my TV ministry is not even taking off yet! I do not have any likes on Facebook! When I go live on Facebook the only person watching is my mom." And you compare to the other pastor in town. When he goes live there are a thousand people on commenting, liking him, and causing hearts to fly across the screen. God says, "Do not worry about him. He has his own trials and tribulation and testing and formation." How far can we go in God if we do not get obsessed with how the other person is getting along in God? How much time have we wasted trying to do someone else's assignment—something we will not be judged or evaluated on?

Has it ever occurred to you that John the Baptist spent more time in jail than he did preaching? How would you like to be the powerful prophet who announces the Messiah but ends up in jail when the Messiah emerges? He's the one who should be the preeminent disciple. He's the one man who actually knows who Jesus is. He's the opposite from the twelve guys who travel with Jesus. One of whom is a betrayer while the eleven others are jockeying for position and at times rebuking the Son of God.

John was the one guy with a little bit of understanding and thirty-years of dedication and Jesus looked at him and said, "Thanks for the baptism," and then walked off and John went to jail. Do you want to be prophetic? I am not saying you are going to jail but I am saying this: biblically if someone is called to be a prophet to the nations it usually means jail-time. There are very practical reasons why John the Baptist, after sitting in a

dark prison cell for about two years, asked his disciples to go to Jesus and ask Jesus if what John gave his life for is actually happening.

For those who are hoping to go out in the blaze of glory we call martyrdom, do not forget that John was probably asleep when a lewd party went wrong and it ended up with John's execution. John was probably half awake and asking, "What is going on?" When he lost his head. There is a deep humility in John's life and ministry. I do not think it ended the way John thought it would. Why do you say that? Because Jesus gave him one last piece of advice: "Blessed is he who is not offended in Me." John's story did not end the way he thought it would, but he did set the stage for the appearance of the Son of God. He is the one who set the stage for the Father to say "This is My Beloved Son."

To get back to where we were a while ago, I think John's prophetic nature was demonstrated perhaps most when he looked at his disciples and said, "I am not Messiah, go follow Him." What man at the height of his ministry says, "You have to go follow somebody else. Let's go ahead and shut down the TV ministry." You can imagine his disciples saying, "But John you have never been more powerful." John would answer, "I know but the problem is if I stay on TV I distract from Jesus so shut it down." That is the essence of what it means to carry this prophetic burden.

There are things which some of you are fighting for but what you did not count on is what has to be done first to set the context for the fulfillment of what you are asking for. We imagine our promises come when we feel strong but it is actually the opposite because strength is not helpful for human beings and it sets the stage for all sorts of disasters.

And just remember if you are contending for something, you should not be contending for something for your own sake; so long as your dream is for your sake the Lord might just hold it back because He does not want to judge and evaluate you on what you would do with the gift of God for your own sake.

Remember when God came to Moses and offered him power that Moses said, "No I am done." The Lord said, "Moses I will give you the power of apostolic preaching where you can rebuke the most powerful you know of on the planet." Moses said "No." Even though the Lord was angry at him, he just said "No I am done, I tried that forty years ago." And though the Lord was angry with Him I think the Lord said, "We have found our man! We found our man and we will send him."

Antioch—A Prophetic Picture of the End-time Church

These are issues that I believe are necessary to the formation of what I would call an Antiochal Church—a church in the pattern of Antioch. And the place of ministry to God is what will set and establish the context for this. The Bible predicts there will be an end-time witness in the nations, and I believe the book of Acts is not just a historical record, but a prophetic picture of how that witness has to happen.

I believe Antioch is the pattern and prophecy of the End Time Missions' Movement. God is going to finish the task the way He began it. In our generation there are houses of prayer, expressions of prayer, and a prayer movement which will all culminate in the church.

Why is the Lord emphasizing this? believe it is quite simple. It is because there is a progression in the book of Acts: ministry to the Lord sets a context for the Holy Spirit to speak and send forth apostolic missions. Right now there is a lot conversation about prayer and missions and I do not have any criticism of any of it. However I will say this prayer and missions is more than missionaries with guitars. There is an apostolic model given for us that the Lord is creating context of prayer and ministry to the Lord so that men and women can plant themselves in it and be formed into something that can be launched into the nations. Does that make sense?

In other words if you are called to do apostolic missions you just might be called to spend fifteen years in a prayer room in your city so that God can form and establish something that can then actually open up areas for the gospel.

We tend to confuse urgency and immediacy. Moses is an example. God said, "I am urgent to deliver because I hear the cries of My people but I am not immediate. Moses is not ready yet." And we have got to bear those years. Sometimes there is passivity and disobedience in the people of God; I am not addressing that, I understand it exists. However there is sometimes an immediacy in us that produces unnecessary trouble because we are not willing to steward urgency in the context of the church.

Quite honestly I think the place of safety for someone feeling that urgency is, "What is the witness of the church?" I am not talking about control and manipulation, I understand that that sometimes happens but I do not think that is the default of the church. I think sometimes you will find the church elders are saying, "I appreciate your burden but you need some more formation." I think that is the grace of God. The wise stewardship of the church over lives is a gift of God and we need it because we are not after formulas, we are after an organic process of formation in the church.

I believe prayer rooms are intended to become places of formation out of which God will thrust end time laborers. Because of the dynamics that are coming on the earth it has to be this way. If God had to build Moses for eighty years to confront Pharaoh; if God had to build Paul for over a decade to thrust him into the Roman empire what is He going to have to do to thrust laborers into an End Time Harvest with the Antichrist emerging on the stage? We have not considered what is coming. And the test and trial that it is so we do not value formation.

Let me just end with this: we need a biblical view of formation. Biblically most sent vessels are probably sent between thirty-five and fifty-five. Why am I bringing that up? Because we have a fixation on youth. I am not saying we should not create a context for youth to grow in gifts. However I am saying there is an unhealthy fixation which does two

things. One is that we assume we can just sign-up twenty-one year olds, throw them in the hardest places of the earth and even though they are not biblically qualified to be elders in the church they are going to somehow set in motion church planting movements in the darkest places of the planet. I am not saying young adults should never go, but if they should go they need to go in a context where the Lord will set them in formation. Does that make sense? Sometimes we send people and set them up for failure.

The second thing is that because we approach youth this way, we get this false idea that when you are somewhere between twenty and thirty you decide who you are going to be and "get your calling." That kind of thinking takes the Holy Spirit out of His place of actually forming and sending messengers. What do I mean by that? I mean when a guy who is twenty-five says, "I do not have a call to missions," we tell him, "Well then that means you are a funder; so that means you can get yourself a good job, you need to raise a couple of kids, you need to write some checks, and you need to go to church." None of that is wrong, but what we do not get is maybe the Lord is saying, "Actually I do want you to raise a couple of kids. I do want you to do business. And I want you to grow in maturity. Because when you are fifty I am going to turn your world upside down and I am going to send you into the hardest place. Because when you have gone through seasons of life and have metal in your spirit and strength in your marriage then you can contend with some of the powers and principalities in the earth."

In some cases, we are setting up young adults for failure and in others we are breeding passivity by not giving you a vision that the Holy Spirit controls your story and for all you know, your empty-nest season might be actually be when the Lord needs you because something has been formed in you because you have been through cycles and wrestled and paid a price and had a few failures which became redemptive in the grace of God. And now when he thrusts you out you are not going to be shaken and hit. And

when you go you can take a few twenty-year olds to go with you and create a platform for them because you are a safe leader.

We need to enlarge our concept of apostolic formation. I am not saying the twenty-year old should never go and give themselves to missions at a young age, but do we have a value for a formation process?

If God has not said something to you then absolutely build a family, build your business, do whatever you are assigned but hold all things loosely because each decade is ultimately unto the Lord. We do not just pick who we are and then stay on one course. Jesus did a little bit of construction work and then Father said "Okay now I need You to do your public ministry and everything in His life shifted." Paul began his life as a Jewish theologian and then the Lord interrupted him to go pastor some Gentiles in Antioch. Then the Lord sent him to do frontier missions. At some point, Paul needed so money so he sewed a few tents and did business. H was able to ebb and flow in his assignments in the grace of God.

Faithfulness to the Lord's Leadership

I want to pray for you tonight. I know I have thrown a lot at you but I do want to pray along these lines: I want to pray that the Lord would release grace on you to embrace the process of formation. For those of you who may feel a specific assignment, I want to pray that you would be able to bear the tension between urgency and immediacy while avoiding the pitfall of passivity. I am not telling you to jump out and just say, "Well one day God will find me"—that is not what I am saying. I am saying you would be able to walk in the grace of God. The key question is how can you cooperate with God? How can you bear the possible disappointment of "it has not happened yet?"

This may sound mean but your assignment has not happened yet because God does not actually need you. However, He does want you. So if it has not happened yet, it is because He is saying, "Well let's go through a process. I can save your city without

you, but I do want to use you but you must get into the process because you are not all that you think you are.”

I want to ask for the grace to have a fresh openness to the Holy Spirit to say, “You know I thought I was going to be this or that”—and maybe you will do that. There is no superiority in any of these assignments they are just assignments, but I want to pray for a fresh grace of God to ask the question again even if you are no longer in your twenties. A grace to submit to the Holy Spirit. He may launch you into an assignment tonight or He may not give you a direct assignment for twenty years, but He will lead you.

The third thing I want to say to those of you who are not hearing anything specific from the Spirit. I want the grace of God to encourage you that the normal stuff of life is the primary place of formation. The laying on of hands is valuable and it catapults us into seasons but it is the grace of God in everyday life that ultimately forms us. Some of the men I know that have the most unusual callings in God and the most dramatic stories have won the victory by showing up every day and being persistent. Though they have heard God’s voice and seen the angels, and had dramatic circumstances they have been primarily formed in the mundane, every day rhythm of life.

If God is not specifically speaking, it is ok to feel the dignity of raising a few children, staying honest with your taxes, and laboring in the church. You do not know what is on the other side of that. You really do not; even the apostle Paul said, “Make your ambition to life a quite lief and be faithful.” (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12). This is much harder than you think.

So let me pray for you. If there is anyone tonight who says, “You know what I want special prayer for this.” I want to open up the altar for a minute if anyone says “You know what I just really want special prayer.” So as the worship leader leads us in a worship song feel free to stand or come forward.