

MISSIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS OF DAVID J. HESSELGRAVE
Missiological Reflection on Acts 13

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The previous lesson introduced us to a new beginning, especially for Saul who from Acts 13 on is called “Paul.” Of course, more is involved than a new beginning for Paul. Though the “mother church” and most of the twelve apostles may still be in Jerusalem, the launching pad for the mission of the early church now becomes (Syrian) Antioch. A “missionary band” will be sent out from that church and the “sending” from Antioch becomes the harbinger of the sending out of multiplied thousands of such missionary bands from the first century to this twenty-first century.

Acts 13 is the story of still another “new beginning.” It’s a pivotal chapter in the grand story of the expansion of Christianity. Missionaries went out from Antioch, but not “on their own.” The Antioch church sent them, but not “on its own.” This is yet another case that can be best understood as one of those “acts of the Holy Spirit.”

Some aspects of chapter 13 are immediately obvious, but no less important for that reason. Notice, for example, that the whole church was somehow involved; that the Holy Spirit was in control; that the missionaries ministered in the local church before being sent; and that fasting and prayer played important roles in the calling and sending process.

Several other aspects of the Acts 13 account, however, are not quite so obvious and therefore may escape without special notice. I have reference to such things as the singular importance of the “sending” concept; the “new” type of missionaries

involved from this point on in Acts; and the abiding significance of the phrase “the work to which I have called them.”

Previously we took note of the fact that the designations “apostle” and “missionary” have the same derivation and that the key idea expressed is that of sending out or sending forth. It is easy to read Acts 13 without pondering the significance of that.

The “sending out” of certain believers meant that some (most) believers did not go. The contemporary notion that all Christians are missionaries and all who can go to the mission field should go is fallacious. All believers are not missionaries any more than all believers are evangelists or pastors. “Believing” in Christ makes a sinner into a saint, not a missionary. “Going” makes a Christian into a traveler—and, hopefully, a traveling witness; but only “sentness” makes a traveling witness into a missionary.

That brings us to a further consideration of a second kind or type of apostle (missionary) in the New Testament. These missionaries in Antioch were set apart and sent out by Christ working, not directly but indirectly, through a Spirit-directed local church. Here we have the beginnings of a new kind of missionary movement carried forward first by Paul, Barnabas and John Mark and then, later, also by Silas (or Silvanus) Timothy, Titus, Epaphroditus, Andronicus, Junius and still others. All of these collectively are referred to in Second Corinthians 8:23 as “apostles (Gr. apostoloi) of the churches.” “Missionaries” is the best translation here.

Finally, notice that these “missionaries of the churches” were “called to a work”—to doing or aiding gospel proclamation and church planting. That work was, and is, the “heart” of Christian mission.