

The Preacher

The epic story of the gospel spreading across the Roman Empire can be described as powerful, against all odds,



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romantic, spell-binding ... but more accurately as the working of God's Spirit in the lives of his people. In spite of societal, government, religious and natural obstacles, the hope of Christ spreads, captivating human

hearts.

Barnabas and Paul return to Antioch, reporting that God is opening "a door of faith for the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27). A reading of the rest of Acts and the New Testament reveals that stories of miracles, conversions and the planting of churches across the empire, including hardships, persecution, threats and rejection. So it was with Jesus and continues to be in our world. Jesus used a parable about a sower who planted, but not all of his seed resulted in a significant harvest. Only the seed sown in the heart of "the man who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit, and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty" (Matthew 13:23). Our text shows two powerful preachers, Barnabas and Paul, who make a significant impact on the early church and across the world.

Barnabas and Paul launch the first missionary journey when the Antioch church and a significant group of prophets and teachers were fasting and worshiping: "the Holy Spirit said 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'" (v. 2). Leave the excitement of God's blessings in Antioch? Who could have predicted that Barnabas and Paul would be trailblazers carrying the grace of God across the empire against all odds? The kingdom of God does not take root in one place or one moment, but in every heart that responds to God's Spirit.

What seems impossible from our human perspective begins with the scattering of the Jerusalem church and the great revival in Antioch of Pisidia as Barnabas and Paul meet with the Jews at the synagogue. Such services usually consisted of Scripture readings and a prayer, often without a teaching

or message. However, if a guest scholar or rabbi were present, he would be invited to speak. Luke 4:16-30 records Jesus' return visit to Nazareth, when he was invited to speak in synagogue and was rejected. Paul's teaching at Antioch was so powerful that a great crowd, "almost the whole city," came for the second Sabbath to hear about Jesus (v. 44). The Jews were outraged, "were filled with jealousy; and blaspheming they contradicted what was spoken by Paul" (v. 45).

Barnabas and Paul understood at that point it was time "to be a light for the Gentiles, so that (they) may bring salvation to the ends of the earth" (v. 47). The city erupted in anger, but the new Gentile believers "were glad and praised the word of the Lord ... and as many as had been destined to eternal life became believers" (v. 49). The Jews had always seen themselves as God's chosen people – not exactly a positive invitation to the rest of the world! Now, the Gentiles understand that God has a place in his heart for them as well.

This message of hope exploded in the general population, resulting in increased persecution against Barnabas and Paul (v. 50). So the two preachers did as Jesus told the twelve apostles to do when they were rejected: "they shook the dust off their feet in protest against (the Jews), and went to Iconium" (v. 51). This result of this turn of events was that "the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (v. 52).

Years ago, a missionary to an area of the Muslim world shared with me an unpublished experience of being invited to an isolated village, asking him to come and tell them about Jesus, because they had experienced dreams in which this Jesus appeared speaking about God's love! The missionary went with them, taking two local men for security and as witnesses. The whole village came to hear. Many, even village leaders, accepted Christ and there was great rejoicing. Because of danger to the missionaries in that region, and threats against the converts, the incident was not publicized. But the results were amazing! Throughout the New Testament we find instances of violent resistance to the gospel, yet those early Christians kept on.

Formations

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Scripture: Acts 13:1-3, 13-14, 44-52

Paul's life was marked by danger and his life probably ended in a Roman prison because of religious enemies who used political connections against him. When Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos on that first missionary journey, John Mark went home to Jerusalem (v. 13). Was John Mark upset because Paul was increasingly leading instead of Barnabas? Did John Mark succumb to fear or uncertainty? Later, Barnabas wanted John Mark to rejoin the team, but Paul would not agree, so the old partnership of Barnabas and Paul came apart. Barnabas, the encourager-preacher-missionary, took John Mark with him to Cyprus (Acts 15:36-41). But there is a positive end to this harsh division, when, in his letter to Timothy, Paul requests, "Get (John) Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry" (2 Timothy 4:11). John Mark is the author of the earliest gospel, the Gospel of Mark!

We can understand that those early Christians faced the constant danger of threats, traveling dangers in those days, and the followers of Jesus viewed as a threat to established religions. God worked in spite of external obstacles, personality differences and no governing body to make policy decisions or control missionaries or license new churches!

You don't have to be in charge! You must be submissive to God in all things. A tragic flaw of the modern "church" is that we are too often busy being "right" and too seldom kneeling before God in surrender and joy. Think back to the tensions and uncertainty among Jesus' disciples at the Last Supper, when our Savior took up a basin and towel to wash his disciples' feet. They were all aghast and uncomprehending, but Peter was the only one to voice their feelings. Jesus said so plainly, "If I then, the Lord and Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:14). No matter your position in a church ... no matter your title or authority ... no matter your social standing or wealth ... God's call is to love and serve. Barnabas and Paul, together and separately, along with Mark and others, were used by God to share the good news about Jesus. God can use us as well.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.