

Table of Contents

Acts 1-12

Acts 13-28

THE MACARTHUR
NEW TESTAMENT
COMMENTARY

ACTS 1-12

John MacArthur

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

Contents

| CHAPTER | PAGE |
|--|------------|
| Preface | v |
| Introduction | 1 |
| 1. Resources for Finishing Our Lord's Unfinished Work | 9 |
| 2. Replacing the Traitor | 25 |
| 3. The Baptism of the Holy Spirit | 37 |
| 4. The First Christian Sermon—part 1 | |
| The Introduction: Explaining Pentecost | 47 |
| 5. The First Christian Sermon—part 2 | |
| The Theme: Proclaiming the Risen Lord | 57 |
| 6. The First Christian Sermon—part 3 | |
| The Appeal and Results | 69 |
| 7. The First Christian Fellowship | 79 |
| 8. A Miracle to Confirm the Word | 93 |
| 9. Peter's Powerful Sermon—part 1 | |
| Peter Preaches Christ | 103 |
| 10. Peter's Powerful Sermon—part 2 | |
| The Necessity of Repentance | 113 |
| 11. How to Handle Persecution | 125 |
| 12. Sins of the Saints | 143 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| 13. The Early Church Pattern for Evangelism | 157 |
| 14. Spiritual Organization | 175 |
| 15. The Man with the Face of an Angel | 187 |
| 16. In Defense of the Faith | 197 |
| 17. The First Christian Martyr | 217 |
| 18. The Persecuted Church Reaches Out | 227 |
| 19. The Faith That Does Not Save | 237 |
| 20. The Faith That Does Save | 249 |
| 21. The Transformed Life | 261 |
| 22. Marks of an Effective Personal Ministry | 279 |
| 23. Salvation Reaches Out | 287 |
| 24. The Gentile Church | 307 |
| 25. The Folly of Fighting God | 317 |
| Index of Greek Words | 329 |
| Index of Scripture | 330 |
| Index of Subjects | 339 |

Resources for Finishing Our Lord's Unfinished Work

1

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. To these He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. And gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky

while He was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them; and they also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.” (1:1-11)

The work of Jesus Christ is both finished and unfinished. His great work of providing redemption is finished, and nothing may be added to it (cf. John 17:4). His work of ministry and proclamation, however, is not finished. That work He only started. Along with the other gospels, **the first account composed** by Luke for **Theophilus** (the gospel of Luke), records **all that Jesus began to do and teach** during His life on earth. The rest of the New Testament describes the continuation of His work by the early church. We are still finishing it until He comes.

Christ's work of redemption is completed, and the church's work of evangelism begins. Acts chronicles the initial stages and features of that unfinished work, and sets the path the church is to follow until the end.

As the book of Acts begins, an important transition takes place. During His ministry on earth, the work of preaching and teaching was done primarily by our Lord Himself as He trained His disciples. Now it is time to pass that responsibility on to the apostles, before He ascends to the Father. The burden of proclaiming repentance and the good news of forgiveness to a lost world will rest squarely on their shoulders. The apostles will also be responsible for teaching the truths of the faith to the church.

From a purely human standpoint the apostles were in no way ready for such a task. There were things they still did not understand. Their faith was weak, as evidenced by our Lord's frequent reprimands of them (cf. Matt. 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; Luke 12:28). Nor had they acquitted themselves well during the traumatic events surrounding Christ's arrest and crucifixion. They had not only failed in public witness but also in private loyalty and in personal faith. Peter, their acknowledged leader, had vehemently and profanely denied even knowing Jesus. His faith and spiritual character were not strong enough to withstand the challenge of a lowly servant girl (Matt. 26:69-70). With the exception of John, all the disciples had fled in fear of their own lives and were nowhere to be found at the crucifixion site. Although Jesus had explicitly predicted His resurrection, the disciples scoffed at the initial reports that His tomb was empty (Luke 24:11). When Jesus appeared to them, He found them cowering behind locked doors for fear of the Jewish authorities (John 20:19). Thomas, not present at that first appearance, refused to believe even the testimony of the other ten apostles (John 20:24-28). Only a

second appearance, and the Lord's invitation to touch His crucifixion wounds, cured Thomas of his skepticism.

The apostles themselves obviously lacked the understanding and spiritual power to complete Jesus' unfinished ministry of evangelism and edification. However, in these His last words to them before His ascension, the Lord Jesus Christ reiterates (cf. John 20:22) the promise of the Spirit. He will empower the apostles (and all subsequent believers) with those resources necessary to finish the Savior's unfinished work. They needed the correct message, manifestation, might, mystery, mission, and motive.

THE MESSAGE

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. (1:1-2)

As already noted, **the first account** refers to Luke's gospel, which he **composed** for **Theophilus** (see the Introduction for further details). That **account** was largely concerned with the earthly life and ministry of our Lord, revealing **all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up**. From the inception of His earthly ministry until His ascension, Jesus had instructed His disciples by both deed and word. His miracles were to strengthen their faith; His parables were to clarify spiritual truth for them; His teaching was to formulate their theology. He revealed to them the truth they would need to carry on His work.

It is axiomatic that those who would carry the message of Christ to the world must know what that message is. There must be an accurate understanding of the content of Christian truth before any ministry can be effective. Such knowledge is foundational to spiritual power and to fulfilling the church's mission. The lack of it is insurmountable and devastating to the evangelistic purpose of God.

The apostle Paul was so concerned about this that it was central to his desire for all believers. In Ephesians 1:18-19a he wrote, "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe."

To the Philippians he wrote, "This I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so

that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ" (Phil. 1:9-10).

Paul's prayer for the Colossians eloquently expresses his longing that all believers be mature in knowledge:

For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience. (Col. 1:9-11)

In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul charged Timothy, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth." Then he challenged his son in the faith to teach sound truth to others (cf. 1 Tim. 4:6, 11, 16; 6:2b, 3, 20, 21; 2 Tim. 1:13, 14; 2:2; 3:16, 17; 4:1-4).

The writer of Hebrews rebuked some of his readers' ignorance of the truth: "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food" (Heb. 5:12).

Mere factual knowledge, of course, was powerless to save those Hebrews, or anyone else, unless it was believed and appropriated. In Matthew 23:2-3, Jesus warned against imitating the hypocritical Pharisees: "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them." Jesus set the pattern of consistency in behaving and proclaiming because, as Luke observed, He **began** both to **do** as well as to **teach**. He perfectly lived the truth He taught.

Paul admonished believers to "adorn the doctrine" they had been taught by how they lived their lives. He wrote, "Show yourself to be an example of good deeds . . . sound in speech . . . showing all good faith that [you] may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect" (Titus 2:7, 8, 10). Evangelism is telling people that God saves from sin. What adorns that message, or makes it believable, is a holy life that clearly demonstrates God can save from sin. It is self-defeating to proclaim the message of salvation from sin while living a sinful life. The messenger must manifest the power of the message he is proclaiming. Jesus preached righteousness and lived it perfectly. We have to preach the same message and strive to live it as perfectly as we can.

Two major factors contribute to the church's powerlessness today. First, many are ignorant of biblical truth. Second, those who may know biblical truth all too often fail to live by it. Proclaiming an erroneous message is tragic, yet so is proclaiming the truth but giving scant evidence that one's life has been transformed by it. Such people cannot expect others to be moved by their proclamation. The exemplary nineteenth-century Scottish preacher Robert Murray McCheyne gave the following words of advice to an aspiring young minister:

Do not forget the culture of the inner man—I mean of the heart. How diligently the cavalry officer keeps his sabre clean and sharp; every stain he rubs off with the greatest care. Remember you are God's sword, His instrument—I trust a chosen vessel unto Him to bear His name. In great measure, according to the purity and perfections of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God. (Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoirs of McCheyne* [Chicago: Moody, 1978], 95)

Those who would be effective in preaching, teaching, and evangelism must give heed to those words. Sound doctrine supported by holiness of life is essential for all who would minister the Word.

Even after His resurrection, Jesus continued to teach the essential realities of His kingdom **until the day when He was taken up**, a reference to His ascension. (Luke uses this term four times in this chapter, vv. 2, 9, 11, 22.) That day, marking the end of our Lord's earthly ministry, had arrived. As He had predicted, Jesus was about to ascend to the Father (cf. John 6:62; 13:1, 3; 16:28; 17:13; 20:17). During His ministry, He had **given orders** to the apostles **by the Holy Spirit**, who was both the source and the power of His ministry (cf. Matt. 4:1; 12:18, 28; Mark 1:12; Luke 3:22; 4:1, 14, 18). Jesus' ministry in the Spirit's power demonstrated the pattern for believers. They, like the apostles, also are to obey Him (cf. Matt. 28:19-20). The Holy Spirit is the source of power for believers' ministry and enables them to obey their Lord's teaching.

The verb *entellō* (**given orders**) signals a command (cf. Matt. 17:9), emphasizing the force of the truth. It encompasses a series of commands to obey God, as well as threats in light of the consequences of disobedience.

While Jesus instructed thousands of people in His days on earth, His primary and constant learners were **the apostles whom He had chosen**. Equipping them for their foundational ministry was a critical goal of His teaching. Their qualification was simply that the Lord had chosen them for salvation and unique service (cf. John 15:16). He

saved, commissioned, equipped, gifted and taught them so that they could be eyewitnesses to the truth and recipients of the revelation of God. They established the message believers are to proclaim.

The importance of this instruction in preparing these men for finishing the Lord's work cannot be overemphasized. Our Lord was building into them the teaching that is later called "the apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42)—the organized body of truth that established the church.

The effectiveness of every believer's ministry in large measure depends on a clear and deep knowledge of the Word. No wonder Spurgeon said,

We might preach 'til our tongue rotted, 'til we exhaust our lungs and die—but never a soul would be converted unless the Holy Spirit uses the Word to convert that soul. So it is blessed to eat into the very heart of the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in scriptural language and your spirit is flavoured with the words of the Lord, so that your blood is Bibline and the very essence of the Bible flows from you. (Partly cited in Richard Ellsworth Day, *The Shadow of the Broad Brim* [Philadelphia: Judson, 1943], 131)

THE MANIFESTATION

To these He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. (1:3)

The apostles needed not only the proper message but also the confidence to proclaim that message even if it cost their lives. They could hardly have been enthusiastic about proclaiming and facing martyrdom for a dead Christ. They needed to know that He was alive and would fulfill His promise of the kingdom. To secure that necessary confidence, Jesus **presented Himself alive, after His suffering**, to them. He offered them **many convincing proofs** (cf. John 20:30), such as entering a room where the doors were locked (John 20:19), showing them His crucifixion wounds (Luke 24:39), and eating and drinking with them (Luke 24:41–43). Most convincing, though, was His **appearing to them over a period of forty days**, beginning with the day of His resurrection. The Greek text actually reads "through forty days." That affirms that though He was not with them continuously, He did appear in their presence at intervals. Although it is by no means exhaustive, the most extensive summary of those appearances is found in 1 Corinthians 15:5–8.

The end result of these appearances was that the apostles became absolutely convinced of the reality of their Lord's physical resurrection. That assurance gave them the boldness to preach the gospel to the very people who crucified Christ. The transformation of the apostles from fearful, cowering skeptics to bold, powerful witnesses is a potent proof of the resurrection.

There have been many suggestions as to the content of the Lord's teaching during the forty days. The mystical religionists held that He imparted to the apostles the secret knowledge that characterized gnosticism. Many in the early church believed He taught them concerning church order (F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971], 33–34). Luke, however, shuts down all such speculations when he reveals that during this time the Lord was **speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God**. He taught them more truth related to the domain of divine rule over the hearts of believers. That theme, a frequent one during the Lord Jesus Christ's earthly ministry (cf. Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 10:7; 13:1ff.; Mark 1:15; Luke 4:43; 9:2; 17:20ff.; John 3:3ff.), offered further proof to the disciples that it was really He.

The Lord wanted them to know that the crucifixion did not nullify the promised millennial kingdom (cf. Isa. 2:2; 11:6–12; Dan. 2:44; Zech. 14:9). The apostles no doubt had difficulty believing in that kingdom after the death of the King. The resurrection changed all that, and from that time on they proclaimed Jesus Christ as the King over an invisible, spiritual kingdom (cf. Acts 17:7; Col. 1:13; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:15; 2 Tim. 4:1; 2 Peter 1:11; Rev. 11:15; 12:10; 17:14; 19:16). The kingdom will be manifested in its fullness at the second coming. At that point our Lord will personally reign on earth for a thousand years.

The **kingdom of God** (the realm where God rules, or the sphere of salvation) encompasses much more than the millennial kingdom, however. It has two basic aspects: the universal kingdom, and the mediatorial kingdom (for a detailed discussion of those two aspects see Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959]; for a more detailed discussion of the kingdom, see *Matthew 8–15*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1987], 348–51).

The universal kingdom refers to God's sovereign rule over all of His creation. Psalm 103:19 reads, "The Lord has established His throne in the heavens; and His sovereignty rules over all." Other passages that describe the universal kingdom include 1 Chronicles 29:11–12; Psalm 10:16; 29:10; 45:6; 59:13; 145:13; Daniel 4:34; 6:26 (cf. Rom. 13:1–7).

The mediatorial kingdom refers to God's spiritual rule and authority over His people on earth through divinely chosen mediators. Through Adam, then the patriarchs, Moses, Joshua, the judges, prophets, and the kings of Israel and Judah, God revealed His will and mediat-

ed His authority to His people. With the end of Israel's monarchy began the times of the Gentiles. During that period, which will last until the second coming of Christ, God mediates His spiritual rule over the hearts of believers through the church (Acts 20:25; Rom. 14:17; Col. 1:13). He does so by means of the Word and the living Christ (Gal. 2:20). The final phase of the mediatorial, spiritual kingdom will dominate the earth in the form of the millennial kingdom, to be set up following Christ's return. During that thousand year period, the Lord Jesus Christ will personally reign on earth, exercising sovereign control over the creation and all men. At the end of the Millennium, with the destruction of all rebels, the spiritual kingdom will be merged with the universal kingdom (1 Cor. 15:24), and they will become the same.

During the church age, then, God mediates His kingdom rule through believers indwelt by the Holy Spirit and obedient to the Word. That is why Peter calls believers "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Peter 2:9).

Today, Jesus Christ does not manifest Himself physically and visibly to believers. Jesus said to Thomas, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed" (John 20:29), while Peter wrote, "Though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory" (1 Peter 1:8). His manifestation to us is no less real, however (cf. Col. 1:29). Such personal communion with the resurrected and exalted Savior is essential for finishing His unfinished work of ministry.

THE MIGHT

And gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now . . ." but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; (1:4-5, 8a)

Having received the message, and witnessed the manifestation of the risen Christ, the apostles may have been tempted to assume they were ready to minister in their own strength. To prevent that error Jesus, after **gathering them together, commanded them not to leave Jerusalem** (cf. Luke 24:49). To the apostles, who were no doubt fired with enthusiasm and eager to begin, that must have seemed a strange command. Yet, it illustrates an important point: All the preparation and

training that knowledge and experience can bring are useless without the proper might. Power had to accompany truth.

To make certain the apostles were not only motivated but also supernaturally empowered for their mission, Jesus commanded them **to wait for what the Father had promised**. That promise, made repeatedly during the Lord's earthly ministry (cf. Luke 11:13; 24:49; John 7:39; 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 20:22), was that the Holy Spirit would be sent (cf. Acts 2:33). God's pledge was to be fulfilled just ten days later on the Day of Pentecost.

The apostles, like all believers of all dispensations, knew of and had tasted the working of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus sent them out on a preaching tour, He told them, "It is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you" (Matt. 10:20; cf. Luke 12:12). In John 14:17, Jesus told the apostles the Holy Spirit "abides with you, and will be in you." Like the other believers in the old economy, they experienced the Spirit's power for salvation and life, as well as for special occasions of ministry. In the new economy, inaugurated at Pentecost, the Spirit would permanently indwell and empower them in a way that was unique.

While this promise of power was primarily for the apostles (as was the promise of revelation and inspiration in John 14:26), it also secondarily forecast the enabling power the Spirit would give to all believers (cf. Acts 8:14-16; 10:44-48; 19:1-7). The general promise was at the heart of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the New Covenant. Ezekiel 36:25-27 records God's promise for all who come into the New Covenant: "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you." There was to come a fullness of the Spirit in some way unique to the New Covenant and for all believers. But there was also a special anointing for the apostles.

A magnificent comparison to this sense of the promise is the baptism of Jesus Christ. Our Lord was obviously in perfect accord and fellowship with the Holy Spirit, yet at the moment of His baptism, Scripture says, "heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove" (Luke 3:21-22). This was emblematic of the fullness of power He would receive from the Spirit to do His earthly work. One chapter later, Luke records that Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit" (4:1). When He spoke in the Nazareth synagogue He began by giving testimony to the unusual enabling of the Spirit by saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives,

and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18–19). Luke 5:17 suggests the same source for His healing power.

Others received such anointing for unusual service, such as Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, who by that power prophesied (Luke 1:67–79). In all of those cases, the Holy Spirit came in special fullness to enable unusually powerful ministry to take place.

Jesus further defines the promise of the Father for them as what **you heard of from Me** (cf. John 14:16–21; 15:26; 20:22). Our Lord’s next words, **for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now**, are reminiscent of John the Baptist’s statement in John 1:33: “He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, ‘He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.’” The promise was to be fulfilled, and the disciples would be **baptized with the Holy Spirit, not many days from now**—ten to be exact. Jesus promised that after He departed, He would send the Spirit (John 16:7).

Despite the claims of many, the apostles’ and early disciples’ experience is not the norm for believers today. They were given unique enabling of the Holy Spirit for their special duties. They also received the general and common baptism with the Holy Spirit in an uncommon way, subsequent to conversion. All believers since the church began are commanded to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18) and to walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:25). Yet these early apostles and believers were told to wait, showing the change that came in the church age. They were in the transitional period associated with the birth of the church. In the present age, baptism by Christ through the agency of the Holy Spirit takes place for all believers at conversion. At that moment, every believer is placed into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). At that point the Spirit also takes up His permanent residency in the converted person’s soul, so there is no such thing as a Christian who does not yet have the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9; cf. 1 Cor. 6:19–20).

The baptism with the Holy Spirit is not a special privilege for some believers, nor are believers challenged and exhorted in Scripture to seek it. It is not even their responsibility to prepare for it by praying, pleading, tarrying, or any other means. The passive voice of the verb translated **be baptized** indicates the baptism by Jesus Christ with the Spirit is entirely a divine activity. It comes, like salvation itself, through grace, not human effort. Titus 3:5–6 says, “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.” God sovereignly pours out the Holy Spirit on those He saves.

The Spirit's presence, leading, and might were absolutely essential if the apostles were to be effective in continuing the Lord's unfinished work. They had already experienced His saving, guiding, teaching, and miracle-working power. Soon they would **receive** the **power** they needed for ministry after **the Holy Spirit** fell on them.

Power translates *dunamis*, from which the English word "dynamite" derives. All believers have in them spiritual dynamite for use of gifts, service, fellowship, and witness. They need to experience the release of that power in their lives through not grieving the Spirit by sin (Eph. 4:30), and being continually filled and controlled by the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). The latter takes place as believers yield moment by moment control of their lives to Him, and is the same as yielding their minds to the Word (Col. 3:16). The result of being filled with the Spirit is expressed by Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:16, 20 "that [God] would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man. . . . Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us . . ." (For a complete discussion of the filling of the Spirit, see *Ephesians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1986].)

THE MYSTERY

And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority;" (1:6-7)

A paradoxical component of the resources for continuing the Lord's ministry was something believers don't know and can't find out. The apostles shared the fervent hope of their nation that Messiah would come and take up His earthly kingdom. Often Jesus had taught them prophetically about the future (Matt. 13:40-50; 24, 25; Luke 12:36-40; 17:20-37; 21:5-36). The enthusiastic question **they were asking Him, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?"** is thus perfectly understandable. After all, here was the resurrected Messiah speaking with them about His kingdom. They knew of no reason the earthly form of the kingdom could not be set up immediately, since the messianic work signaling the end of the age had arrived. It must be remembered that the interval between the two comings of Messiah was not explicitly taught in the Old Testament. The disciples on the road to Emmaus were greatly disappointed that Jesus had not redeemed Israel and set up the kingdom (Luke 24:21). Further, the apostles knew that

Ezekiel 36 and Joel 2 connected the coming of the kingdom with the outpouring of the Spirit Jesus had just promised. It is understandable that they hoped the arrival of the kingdom was imminent. Surely it was for this kingdom they had hoped since they first joined Jesus. They had experienced a roller coaster ride of hope and doubt which they now felt might be over.

Jesus, however, quickly brings them back to reality. It was not for them **to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority**. The Scriptures teach many things about the earthly and glorious reign of Jesus Christ in His kingdom, but not the precise time of its establishment. **Times** (*kairos*) refers to features, characteristics of eras, and events. God, **by His own authority**, has determined all the aspects of the future and the kingdom. But as far as men are concerned, that remains one of “the secret things” that “belong to the Lord our God” (Deut. 29:29). All that believers can know is that the kingdom will be established at the second coming (Matt. 25:21–34). The time of the second coming, however, remains unrevealed (Mark 13:32).

That Jesus does not deny their expectation of a literal, earthly kingdom involving Israel is highly significant. It shows that their understanding of the promised kingdom was correct, except for the time of its coming. If they were mistaken about such a crucial point in His kingdom teaching, His failure to correct them is mystifying and deceptive. A far more likely explanation is that the apostles’ expectation of a literal, earthly kingdom mirrored the Lord’s own teaching and the plan of God clearly revealed in the Old Testament.

Since the season of His coming cannot be known, and the Lord could return at any moment in the rapture of the church (cf. 1 Thess. 5:2), believers must be continually ready. All must remember the Lord’s solemn warning in Mark 13:33–37:

Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time is. It is like a man, away on a journey, who upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge, assigning to each one his task, also commanded the doorkeeper to stay on the alert. Therefore, be on the alert—for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all, “Be on the alert!”

Such continual vigilance and anticipation, through all generations of believers who were looking for Jesus to return, has served as true incentive to live with urgency and minister with passion.

THE MISSION

“you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” (1:8b)

Rather than engage in useless speculation over the time for the coming of the kingdom, the apostles were to focus on the work at hand. **Witnesses** are those who see something and tell others about it. I once witnessed an attempted murder. When I testified in court, they wanted to know three things: what I saw, heard, and felt. I was reminded of 1 John 1:1–2, where John writes, “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life . . . we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you.” A witness for Jesus Christ is simply someone who tells the truth about Him. The apostles, as Peter points out, “were eyewitnesses of His majesty” (2 Peter 1:16).

This was the foremost purpose for which the empowering of the Holy Spirit came. And the early church was so effective that they “upset the world” (Acts 17:6). Jesus commands all believers to be His witness in the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:19–20).

So many Christians sealed their witness to Christ with their blood that *marturēs* (**witnesses**) came to mean “martyrs.” Their blood, as the second-century theologian Tertullian stated, became the seed of the church. Many were drawn to faith in Christ by observing how calmly and joyously Christians met their deaths.

There is a sense in which believers do not even choose whether or not to be **witnesses**. They *are* witnesses, and the only question is how effective their witness is. If the church is to reach the lost world with the good news of the gospel, believers must “sanctify Christ as Lord in [their] hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks [them] to give an account for the hope that is in [them]” (1 Peter 3:15). Titus 2 indicates that how Christians live their lives lays the platform of integrity and believability on which effective personal witness is built. In that text, Paul writes that we are to so live “that the word of God may not be dishonored” (v. 5), “that the opponent [of the Christian faith] may be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us” (v. 8), and “that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect” (v. 10), so that we may make it possible that the saving gospel comes winsomely to all.

Beginning in **Jerusalem**, the apostles carried out the Lord's mandate. Their witness spread beyond there to **all Judea and Samaria** (the neighboring area), and finally **even to the remotest part of the earth**. Verse 8 provides the general outline for the book of Acts. Following that outline, Luke chronicles the irresistible march of Christianity from Jerusalem, into Samaria and then through the Roman world. As the book unfolds, we will move through those three sections of the expansion of the church.

This beginning was to dramatically alter the course of history, and the spread of the gospel message has continued past Acts to reach all the earth. Today, believers continue to have the responsibility for being Christ's witnesses throughout this world. The sphere for witnessing is as extensive as the kingdom—all the world. That was and is the mission for the church until Jesus comes.

THE MOTIVE

And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them; and they also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." (1:9–11)

The Lord Jesus Christ was about to depart for heaven to return to His former glory (cf. John 17:1–6). Before doing that, He left the apostles with a final, dramatic moment which provided powerful motivation for carrying on His work. To their amazement, **He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight** (cf. vv. 2, 11, 22). Jesus, in His glorious resurrection body, left this world for the realm of heaven to take His place on the throne at God's right hand. Back on the Mount of Olives (Luke 24:50), the shocked apostles **were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing**. To their further consternation, angels, described as **two men in white clothing**, suddenly appeared and **stood beside them**. Such angelic appearances were not unusual (Gen. 18:2; Josh. 5:13–15; Mark 16:5). Two of them confirm the promise of Christ's return as true (cf. John 8:17). These angels asked the bewildered apostles, **"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky?"** They are called **men of Galilee** since all the apostles (with the exception of the dead traitor Judas) were from that region. The angels' question, **"why do you stand looking**

into the sky?" indicates more than curiosity at the miracle. The word translated **looking** indicates a long gaze, in this case a transfixed look as if losing someone. The question, then, is a mild rebuke to the apostles. They were not losing Jesus, as they feared. Maybe some of them remembered the vision of Ezekiel, who saw the glory of God depart to heaven from Israel (Ezek. 10:18-19) and feared it was happening again.

The angels went on to say, **"This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven."** The promise of Zechariah 14:4 will come to pass, namely that the Messiah will return to the Mount of Olives. The angels stressed that **this** same **Jesus** whom they had watched ascend would one day return **in just the same way as** they had **watched Him go into heaven**. He will return in His glorified body, accompanied with clouds (cf. Dan. 7:13; Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Rev. 1:7; 14:14), just as at His ascension.

This becomes a compelling motive. No one knows when He will come, but everyone must live in anticipation that it could be in their lifetime (cf. Rom. 13:12-14; 2 Peter 3:14-18). The truth that Christ will return provides a powerful motive to serve Him. Paul writes, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). In Revelation 22:12 the Lord Jesus Christ said, "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done." Believers must serve Christ faithfully in light of His imminent return. In Revelation 16:15 Jesus warned, "Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his garments, lest he walk about naked and men see his shame" (cf. 1 John 2:28).

The task of finishing the work that Jesus began, the duty of evangelizing the lost world, is a daunting one. But the Lord in His mercy from the start has provided all the spiritual resources necessary to accomplish that task. It is up to each believer to appropriate those resources and put them to use. "We must work the works of Him who sent [Jesus Christ], as long as it is day; night is coming, when no man can work" (John 9:4).

THE MACARTHUR
NEW TESTAMENT
COMMENTARY
ACTS 13-28

John MacArthur

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

Contents

| CHAPTER | PAGE |
|--|------|
| Preface | v |
| Outline | vi |
| 1. The Character of an Effective Church | 1 |
| 2. Paul Preaches Jesus | 13 |
| 3. The Troubling Gospel | 29 |
| 4. Qualities of an Effective Servant of Jesus Christ | 41 |
| 5. The Jerusalem Council: Is Salvation by Law or Grace? | 59 |
| 6. Evangelism the Right Way | 77 |
| 7. Portraits of Two Women | 89 |
| 8. Turning Persecution into Production | 99 |
| 9. Men Who Turned the World Upside Down | 113 |
| 10. Getting to Know the Unknown God | 127 |
| 11. Encouraging the Servant of God | 143 |
| 12. Breaking with the Past | 155 |
| 13. The Powerful Word | 167 |
| 14. The Riot at Ephesus | 179 |
| 15. For the Love of the Church | 191 |
| 16. Paul's View of the Ministry | 207 |
| 17. A Charge to New Testament Church Leaders | 219 |

| | | |
|------------|--|-----|
| 18. | The Courage of Conviction | 233 |
| 19. | Paul's Arrival at Jerusalem | 245 |
| 20. | Paul's Arrest | 255 |
| 21. | Paul Before the Sanhedrin | 275 |
| 22. | Providential Protection | 287 |
| 23. | Paul on Trial Phase One: Before Felix | 299 |
| 24. | Paul on Trial Phase Two: Before Festus | 313 |
| 25. | Paul on Trial Phase Three: Before Agrippa | 323 |
| 26. | Paul's Journey to Rome, Part 1 The Storm and Shipwreck | 341 |
| 27. | Paul's Journey to Rome, Part 2 The Last Lap: Malta to Rome | 357 |
| 28. | The Story That Never Ends | 367 |
| | Bibliography | 377 |
| | Index of Greek Words | 380 |
| | Index of Scripture | 381 |
| | Index of Subjects | 392 |

The Character of an Effective Church (Acts 13:1–13)

1

Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. And when they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper. And when they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for thus his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze upon him, and said, “You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the

devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time.” And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord. Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John left them and returned to Jerusalem. (13:1–13)

There is much truth in the humorous adage that some people make things happen, others watch things happen, while still others are left wondering what happened. What is true of individuals is also true of churches. Some churches are dynamic, aggressively reaching out with the gospel to make an impact on the world. Some know God is moving in other churches and wonder why they aren't experiencing that power. Still others just barely exist, languishing while the spiritual (and maybe even physical) weeds grow. They make an impact only on their members' social lives.

Acts 11 introduced a leadership and a congregation that God used to make things happen—the Antioch church, the first beachhead of Christianity in the pagan world. That church had an impressive beginning. Acts 11:21 records that “a large number who believed turned to the Lord” under the ministry of Hellenistic Jews who fled Jerusalem following Stephen's martyrdom (11:19–20). The Antioch church grew dramatically under the capable leadership of Barnabas and Saul (11:26). It was in Antioch that the name *Christians* was first given to the followers of Jesus Christ (11:26). Although it was intended as a derisive term, the believers wore it as a badge of honor. Members of this largely Gentile church showed their love for their Jewish brethren by sending them famine relief (11:27–30).

But of all the factors that made the Antioch church strong, the most significant was its submission to the Holy Spirit. Both the leaders (cf. 11:24; 13:9) and the congregation (cf. 13:2, 4) of the Antioch church were Spirit-filled. They were utterly dependent on the Spirit, who energized every phase of their ministry.

What marks a Spirit-filled church? A Spirit-filled church may be defined simply as one whose members walk in obedience to the will of God. Since God reveals His will in Scripture, a Spirit-filled church must be deeply committed to the Word of God. Indeed, a comparison of Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3 reveals that being filled with the Spirit and letting the Word richly dwell in one's life produce the same effects. Therefore they are the two sides of the same spiritual reality.

Chapter 13 marks a turning point in Acts. The first twelve chapters have focused on the ministry of Peter; the remaining chapters focus on Paul. Until now the emphasis has been on the Jewish church in Jerusalem and Judea; chapters 13–28 describe the spread of the Gentile church throughout the Roman world. And it was from the dynamic, doctrinally sound, growing, Spirit-controlled church at Antioch that the flag of Gentile missions was unfurled. It had spiritual leaders, with a spiritual ministry, who went on a spiritual mission, faced spiritual opposition, and experienced spiritual victory.

SPIRITUAL LEADERS

Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. (13:1)

Effective, strong churches inevitably have godly leaders, and the church **at Antioch** was no exception. God has always put a premium on spiritual leadership (Acts 6:3; 1 Tim. 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9; cf. Hos. 4:9; Matt. 9:36). These five men were the heart of the ministry at Antioch.

Luke describes them as **prophets and teachers**, two important New Testament terms. **Prophets** played a significant role in the apostolic church (cf. 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 2:20; 3:5; 4:11). Like the apostles, they were preachers of God's Word and were responsible in the early years of the church to instruct the local congregations. Sometimes they received new revelation from God, as in Acts 11:28 and 21:10–11. Both of those incidents record that the prophets, in contrast to the apostles, received practical, not doctrinal revelation. The prophets' function as receivers of divine revelation ended with the cessation of the temporary sign gifts. Even their office, like that of the apostles, was replaced by pastor-teachers and evangelists (cf. Eph. 4:11–12), who were the elders and overseers (1 Tim. 3:1ff.; Titus 1:5–9). (For a discussion of the cessation of the sign gifts, see John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992] and *1 Corinthians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1984].)

The prophets edified the saints by preaching expositions of existing revelation (cf. 1 Thess. 5:20). Although prophets of that unique kind no longer exist, the similar gift for preaching the Word of God remains. It is given to pastors and evangelists, who proclaim what Peter called "the prophetic word" (2 Pet. 1:19) and is still vital to the spiritual health of the church (cf. Rom. 10:14–18). All the way to the return of the Lord, the "spirit of prophecy" continues to be "the testimony of Jesus" (Rev. 19:10).

Teachers are critical in today's church (cf. 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11; James 3:1). Theirs is the ministry of giving others a clear understanding of biblical truth. The distinctive of the ministry of teachers is its emphasis on pedagogy rather than on proclamation. That they are somewhat different from preachers seems apparent in texts that discuss both, though the same gifted man can sometimes perform both functions, as Acts 15:35 indicates.

Antioch had five men who were both preachers and teachers of God's Word. It was through their ministry that the church was built up in the faith.

Barnabas has already appeared several times in Acts. From 4:36 we learn he was a Levite from the island of Cyprus. His birth name was Joseph, but the apostles named him **Barnabas**, which means "Son of Encouragement"—an apt description of this gentle, loving man. It was Barnabas who convinced the skeptical and suspicious believers at Jerusalem that Saul's conversion was genuine (9:27). The Jerusalem fellowship sent him to investigate the rumors that Gentiles had been saved in Antioch (11:22)—a sign of the high esteem in which the Jerusalem church held him. He brought Saul from Tarsus and got him involved in the ministry in Antioch (11:25–26). Barnabas, along with Saul, carried the Antioch church's contributions for the relief of the Judean church to Jerusalem (11:30).

Little is known about **Simeon, Lucius, and Manaen**. Luke's note that **Simeon was called Niger** (which means "black") may suggest that he was a dark-skinned man, an African, or both. While some identify him with Simon of Cyrene, who carried Jesus' cross (Mark 15:21), there is no direct evidence for that identification. **Lucius**, but not Simeon, is identified with the city of **Cyrene** in North Africa. There is nothing to link him with the Lucius whom Paul greets in Romans 16:21 and certainly no evidence to identify him (as some have argued) as Luke the physician. **Manaen** was notable, Luke records, because he **had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch** (Herod Antipas, the Herod of the gospels). *Suntrophos* (**had been brought up with**) can be translated "foster-brother." He had been reared in Herod the Great's household along with Herod Antipas. **Saul**, or Paul, needs no introduction. Through his tireless efforts the gospel spread throughout the Gentile world. These were the shepherds who led the flock to effectiveness and impact.

SPIRITUAL MINISTRY

And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, (13:2a)

The responsibility of spiritual shepherds is spiritual ministry.

Unlike many in the ministry today who are busy with shallow activities and programs, the leaders at Antioch understood their spiritual mandate clearly. They patterned themselves after the apostles, who, according to Acts 6:4, devoted themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. Those are ever the priorities for the man of God.

Ministering is from *leitourgeō*, a word that originally meant “to discharge a public office.” It was “used of the Attic orators who served the state at their own cost” (A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker’s reprint of the 1930 edition], 3:177). The leaders of the Antioch church faithfully discharged the office God called them to and fulfilled their ministry (cf. 2 Tim. 4:5).

In Scripture, however, *leitourgeō* means more than public service; it describes priestly service. In the Septuagint it described the priests who ministered in the tabernacle (Ex. 28:41). Serving in a leadership role in the church must be viewed as an act of worship to God. Such service consists of offering spiritual sacrifices to Him (cf. Heb. 13:15–16), including prayer, oversight of the flock, studying, and preaching and teaching the Word.

Their **ministering** was not to the congregation but to **the Lord**. It is crucial to understand that God is the audience for all spiritual ministry (cf. Acts 20:19–20). Those whose goal is ministering to people will be tempted to compromise to achieve that end. Making the Lord the object of ministry obviates the need for compromise.

Like the Macedonian believers, those in ministry must give themselves first to the Lord and only then to other believers (cf. 2 Cor. 8:5). They are to “be diligent to present [themselves] approved to God,” not to men (2 Tim. 2:15). The man of God, like every believer, does his “work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men,” because “it is the Lord Christ whom [he serves]” (Col. 3:23–24).

The Bible frequently connects **fasting** with times of vigilant, passionate prayer (cf. Neh. 1:4; Ps. 35:13; Dan. 9:3; Matt. 17:21; Luke 2:37; 5:33; Acts 14:23). Believers may become so concerned with spiritual issues that they lose the desire to eat, or they set aside food to concentrate on intense intercession. Those who know little of fasting perhaps know little about such concern. Scripture nowhere commands believers to fast, but Jesus assumed His followers would do so (Matt. 6:17; Luke 5:33–35). In sharp contrast to the showy, hypocritical fasting of the Pharisees, believers’ fasting is for God’s eyes only (Matt. 6:16–18). (For a further discussion of fasting, see *Matthew 1–7*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1985], 399ff.)

SPIRITUAL MISSION

the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. And when they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper. (13:2b-5)

Spiritual men with effective spiritual ministry will see God extend their spiritual mission. God chooses for further ministry those already actively serving Him. He is not likely to take idle Christians down from the shelf, dust them off, and entrust them with important work. Saul and Barnabas were deeply involved in ministering to the Lord when their call to further service came. God chose experienced, proven men for the vitally important mission to the Gentiles.

The truth that all ministry is to be done for the Lord is here reinforced by the Spirit’s command to **set apart** Barnabas and Saul **for** Himself. They were His men, to use as He would and send wherever He desired.

Another principle that flows out of this text is that God sovereignly calls men to the ministry. The church did not choose Saul and Barnabas. Indeed, they would probably have been the last two chosen, since they were the best the church had. Nor did Saul and Barnabas volunteer. Instead, the Spirit sovereignly **called them** to full-time missionary service.

A final principle to be gleaned from this text is the importance of waiting for God’s timing. The Antioch church did not concoct schemes or map out strategies to reach the Gentile world. Instead, it concentrated on carrying out the ministries God had already entrusted to it. An important feature in discerning God’s will for the future is to do His will in the present.

How **the Holy Spirit** communicated to the church is not revealed. Presumably He spoke through one of the prophets. However the message was communicated, the church’s response was instant obedience. There was no grumbling or resentment; the Holy Spirit demanded the church’s best, and Antioch joyously provided Saul and Barnabas.

After **they had fasted and prayed**, no doubt for the success of Saul and Barnabas’s ministry, the leaders **laid their hands on them**. The laying on of hands neither granted Saul and Barnabas the Holy Spirit nor ordained them to ministry. Both had already received the Spirit

(Acts 9:17; 11:24) and had been serving in the ministry for many years. The laying on of hands simply signified identification, confirmation, and unity in their upcoming mission (cf. Num. 8:10; 27:18–23).

Having prayed for Saul and Barnabas and having publicly identified with them, the Antioch church **sent them away**. A better translation of *apoluō* (**sent them away**) might be “they let them go,” or “they released them.” It is clear from verse 1 that the Spirit, not the church, sent out the two missionaries. Since He had already sent them, all the church could do was cut the cord and let them go. That truth is repeated in verse 4, where Luke relates that the missionaries were **sent out by the Holy Spirit**.

Leaving Antioch to begin the mission, **they went down to Seleucia**. Located some sixteen miles away, near the mouth of the Orontes River, **Seleucia** served as the port of Antioch. Whether the missionaries took the road to Seleucia or traveled by boat down the Orontes is not stated. Once in Seleucia, they took passage on a ship and **sailed to Cyprus**.

Cyprus is the third largest island in the Mediterranean, after Sicily and Sardinia. It is about 60 miles off the Syrian coast and would have been visible from Seleucia on a clear day. The main part of the island is 90 to 100 miles long and up to 60 miles wide. In New Testament times its two major cities were Salamis, the chief port and commercial center, and Paphos, the capital.

Saul and Barnabas no doubt chose to begin their missionary outreach on Cyprus for several reasons. According to Acts 4:36, it was Barnabas’s home and thus familiar territory. Also, it was close to Antioch, probably two days’ journey at most. Further, Cyprus had a large Jewish population. All those reasons made it an ideal starting point for outreach to the Gentile world.

Arriving at the main port city, **Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews**. To preach the gospel first to the Jews was Paul’s custom throughout his missionary journeys. Cyprus had a Jewish settlement large enough to support several synagogues in Salamis. As they traveled from synagogue to synagogue, Saul and Barnabas **had John Mark as their helper**. He was a native of Jerusalem (Acts 12:12) and was Barnabas’s cousin (Col. 4:10). When Saul and Barnabas returned to Antioch from Jerusalem after delivering relief aid, John Mark came with them (Acts 12:25). He had undoubtedly left Antioch along with Saul and Barnabas. Although he was soon to desert them and return to Jerusalem, for now he was a member of the team, helping Saul and Barnabas carry out their spiritual mission.

SPIRITUAL OPPOSITION

And when they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for thus his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. . . . Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John left them and returned to Jerusalem. (13:6–8, 13)

When God's people seek to advance His purposes, satanic opposition is unavoidable. The missionary team had by now traversed **the whole island** from Salamis in the northeast corner **as far as Paphos** on the southwest coast. Besides being the seat of the Roman government, **Paphos** was

a great center for the worship of Aphrodite [Venus]. . . . The greatest festival in Cyprus in honor of Aphrodite was the Aphrodisia, held for three days each spring. It was attended by great crowds not only from all parts of Cyprus but also from surrounding countries. (Charles F. Pfeiffer and Howard F. Vos, *The Wycliffe Historical Geography of Bible Lands* [Chicago: Moody, 1967], 305–6)

It was a city rife with immorality: "Extensive religious prostitution accompanied [Aphrodite's] rites at Paphos" (Pfeiffer and Vos, 306).

Here, in the capital, **they found a certain magician**. As happened when Peter and John brought the gospel to Samaria, Saul and Barnabas were confronted by a **magician**. *Magos* (**magician**) does not necessarily have an evil connotation. It is used, for example, in Matthew 2:1 to describe the wise men who visited the infant Jesus and His family. The term originally referred to the hereditary priestly tribe within the Median nation. They were well-versed in astronomy and astrology, agriculture, mathematics, and history. They were involved in various occult practices and were famous for their ability to interpret dreams (cf. Dan. 2:1ff.). Such was their political power and influence that no Persian ruler came to power without their approval. (For further information, see *Matthew 1–7*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1985], 26–28.) Later, however, the term **magician** was used to describe all sorts of practitioners of magic and dabblers in the occult. **Bar-Jesus**, being **Jewish**, obviously was not one of the Medo-Persian magi. Like

Simon (Acts 8:9–11), he was a deceiver who put his knowledge to evil use.

Bar-Jesus was not only a magician; Luke further describes him as a **false prophet**. His name, ironically, means “son of salvation”—a strange name indeed for a deceiving false prophet. It was no accident that this man had attached himself to the Roman **proconsul**. The kingdom of darkness is eager to influence those who rule. Much of the evil in this world can be traced ultimately to such baleful influence by “the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12; cf. Dan. 10:13–11:1).

The Roman governor of Cyprus was **Sergius Paulus**, whom Luke describes as a **man of intelligence**. The accuracy of Luke’s account is verified by an inscription found at Soloi, on the north coast of Cyprus. That inscription dates itself “in the proconsulship of Paulus” (Sir William M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* [reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975], 74).

As an intelligent Roman, the governor no doubt had a keen interest in new philosophies and religious beliefs. That he had in his entourage a Jewish teacher (albeit a renegade one) showed he had some interest in Judaism. Saul and Barnabas appeared to him to be two more Jewish teachers from whom he could learn more about the Jewish faith. Further, his duties as governor prompted him to investigate this new teaching that was sweeping Cyprus. Accordingly, he **summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God**.

Alarmed at the prospect of Sergius Paulus’s conversion, and his own subsequent loss of status, **Elymas the magician (for thus his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith**. He was doing the bidding of his evil master, Satan. Like many Jewish people at this time, Bar-Jesus also had a Greek name, **Elymas**, by which he was known at the court of Sergius Paulus. Luke’s parenthetical note that **thus his name is translated** does not mean **Elymas** translates Bar-Jesus. Instead, **Elymas** was apparently the Greek transliteration of an Arabic word for “magician” (Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Acts* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990], 462).

It is well to remember the lesson of these verses. Leading someone to Christ is not merely an academic exercise, nor is it a matter of making a successful sales pitch. Rather, it involves all-out war against the forces of hell. Saul and Barnabas battled Bar-Jesus for the soul of Sergius Paulus.

But such external attacks are not Satan’s only strategy. Even more deadly over the centuries have been his attacks on the church from within. It is hardly surprising, then, that he sought to derail the mission to the Gentiles with internal pressure as well. That pressure came in John

Mark's desertion. Having completed their work on Cyprus, **Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John left them and returned to Jerusalem.** Perga was a major city in the Roman province of **Pamphylia**, in Asia Minor.

What specifically was the reason **John left them and returned to Jerusalem** is not clear. Some have suggested that he was afraid to travel in the dangerous mountains of Pamphylia, a region infested with bands of robbers (cf. 2 Cor. 11:26). Others think he resented Paul's taking the ascendancy over his cousin, Barnabas; others that he disapproved of Paul's emphasis on preaching the gospel to the Gentiles; and still others that he feared persecution. Whatever the reason, Paul did not consider it valid (Acts 15:38). And, tragically, although John Mark's desertion did not stop the mission to the Gentiles, it did split the successful team of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36–40). Internal dissension, division, and disunity continue to disrupt works of God that have stood fast against the storms of external opposition.

SPIRITUAL VICTORY

But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze upon him, and said, "You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time." And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord. (13:9–12)

The battle for the soul of Sergius Paulus now reached its climax. **Saul**, who, Luke notes, **was also known** by his Roman name **Paul**, had had enough of the magician's interference. Being **filled with the Holy Spirit**, Paul **fixed his gaze upon** that false prophet. As with all those who dabble in the occult and demonic doctrine, Bar-Jesus was **full of all deceit and fraud**. *Dolos* (**deceit**) is the Greek word for "a snare." Like a cleverly disguised snare, Bar-Jesus was not what he appeared to be to his unsuspecting victims. *Radiourgias* (**fraud**) appears only here in the New Testament. It meant originally, "ease or facility in doing; hence readiness in turning the hand to anything, bad or good; and so recklessness, unscrupulousness, wickedness" (Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946], 1:516). Far from being a "son of salvation," Bar-Jesus was accused by Paul as being

in reality a **son of the devil**. Bar-Jesus fancied himself a righteous prophet, but Paul denounced him as the **enemy of all righteousness**. He constantly twisted and perverted God's truth, leading to Paul's withering question, "**will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord?**"

Bar-Jesus was not to escape with a mere tongue lashing, however. As he had made others spiritually blind, he was now to suffer physical blindness. Paul informed him, "**the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time.**" That Bar-Jesus' blindness was to be temporary was an indication of God's mercy. One can only hope that he recovered from his spiritual blindness as well.

The missionaries' spiritual victory was not only negative, as seen in the defeat of Bar-Jesus, but also positive. Satan's emissary had been defeated and silenced; and now Paul and Barnabas were about to win the battle for Sergius Paulus's soul: **Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord**. As so often is related in Acts, God used a miracle to confirm the authenticity of His messengers and the truth of His Word. Significantly, it was **the teaching of the Lord**, not the stunning miracle he had just witnessed, that prompted **the proconsul** to believe. He was **amazed at the teaching of the Lord**, not at the miracle.

There is no reason to doubt the genuineness of Sergius Paulus's belief. That he became a true Christian is suggested by some extrabiblical sources. The great nineteenth-century archaeologist Sir William Ramsay "argued from other literary sources that Sergia Paulla, the proconsul's daughter, was a Christian, as was her son Gaius Caristianus Fronto, the first citizen of Pisidian Antioch to enter the Roman senate" (Richard N. Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles," in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981], 9:421; cf. E. M. Blaiklock, *The Archaeology of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977], 107; J. A. Thompson, *The Bible and Archaeology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 392). But apart from such external evidence, Luke's account is clear. The conversion of Sergius Paulus "has been the main point of the whole Cyprus narrative" (John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary: Acts* [Nashville: Broadman, 1992], 295). As his erstwhile counselor was plunged into physical darkness, the proconsul emerged from spiritual darkness into the gospel's glorious light.

The church at Antioch stands for all time as an example of an effective church. The successful mission to evangelize the Gentile world that it initiated was a turning point in history. The true church of Jesus Christ on earth today is the spiritual legacy of that outreach.

four practices: **things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood**. Those were violations of the law of **Moses**, who **from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath**. To needlessly violate the Mosaic sanctions would destroy the church's credibility with unbelieving Jews and also offend believing ones. It would be an abuse of the freedom in Christ believers enjoy (cf. 1 Pet. 2:16).

Things contaminated by idols refers to food offered to pagan gods and then sold in temple butcher shops. Idolatry was a repulsive, blasphemous matter to the Jews. The Old Testament is replete with warnings against it (cf. Ex. 20:3; 34:17; Deut. 5:7). Further, their ancestors' practice of idolatry led to the destruction of the nation (cf. 2 Kings 17:7–18; 2 Chron. 36:14–16). They would naturally seek to avoid any manifestation of it, including eating meat offered to idols. That was a serious issue in the early church, one later dealt with at length by Paul (1 Cor. 8:1–13; 10:14–33).

Fornication describes sexual sin in general, and the orgies associated with the worship of pagan gods in particular. Illicit sex was an integral part of the pagan Gentile worship. Temple priestesses were often little more than prostitutes. Although **fornication** is obviously a moral issue (cf. 1 Cor. 6:15–20), in a broader sense it is also an issue of consideration to Jews. In all their marriage relations and conduct with the opposite sex, the Gentiles were to do nothing offensive to God's law or Jewish sensibilities.

Abstaining from **what is strangled and from blood** involved the dietary laws (Gen. 9:4; Lev. 3:17; 7:26; 17:12–14; 19:26; Deut. 12:16, 23; 15:23; 1 Sam. 14:34; Ezek. 33:25). While certainly not imposing those laws on the Gentile believers (cf. Acts 10:9–16), James set forth these as minimum requirements for fellowship. As noted above, freedom in Christ does not grant the right to sin, or to offend another believer.

Having decided both the doctrinal and practical issues, **it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren**. The Council's decision needed to be communicated to the church at **Antioch**, the center of Gentile Christianity. That **the apostles and the elders, with the whole church** agreed was yet another manifestation of the unity that marked the early church (cf. Acts 6:5).

It was necessary **to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas**, or else the Judaizers would surely have accused the two missionaries of giving a biased account of the proceedings. Accordingly, they selected **Judas called Barsabbas, and**

Silas, whom Luke describes as **leading men among the brethren**. Nothing more is known of **Judas called Barsabbas**, nor whether he was related to the Joseph Barsabbas mentioned in Acts 1:23. **Silas**, however, played a prominent role in New Testament history. Also known as Silvanus (2 Cor. 1:19; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; 1 Pet. 5:12), he accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey (15:40; 16:19, 25, 29; 17:4, 10, 14, 15; 18:5). He later served as Peter’s amanuensis for his first epistle (1 Pet. 5:12). Luke describes both Judas and Silas as **leading men** in the Jerusalem church. Recognizing the vital importance of the mission, the Jerusalem church sent two of its best. Another indication of how seriously the church leaders viewed the situation is that they sent a **letter** along with the delegation. That letter, **from the apostles and the brethren who are elders** was addressed **to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles**. That the Jerusalem church addressed the Gentiles as **brethren** was significant. It affirmed the church’s acceptance of them as fellow believers and undermined the Judaizers’ position. The salutation *chairein* (**greetings**) appears only here, in Acts 23:26 (where it is used by a Roman, Claudius Lysias), and in James 1:1. That may imply that James wrote the letter on behalf of the others. **Syria and Cilicia** were administered at this time as a single Roman district, of which Antioch was the capital. Many of the churches in **Cilicia** had no doubt been founded by Paul during his stay there after his flight from Jerusalem (Acts 9:30). The Gentile churches on Cyprus and in Galatia were not mentioned. They may have been viewed as extensions of the Antioch church, or the letter may have been addressed only to Antioch because that church had sent the delegation to Jerusalem (Homer A. Kent, Jr., *Jerusalem to Rome* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992], 128). In any case, the letter was delivered to the Galatian churches by Paul and Silas (Acts 16:4).

The occasion for the letter is stated. The Jerusalem church had **heard that some of its number to whom it gave no instruction had disturbed** the Antioch believers **with their words, unsettling their souls**. The Judaizers who were troubling the Antioch church had no authorization from Jerusalem. *Tarassō* (**disturbed**) is not the same word used in verse 19. It is a strong word, meaning “to deeply upset,” “to deeply disturb,” “to perplex,” or “to create fear.” It is used in John 14:1 to describe the disciples’ agitated state after Jesus told them of His impending death. It also appears in reference to false teaching in Galatians 1:7 and 5:10. *Anaskeuazō* (**unsettling**) appears only here in the New Testament. In extrabiblical Greek it was used to speak of going bankrupt or of a military force plundering a town (W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* [Old Tappan, N. J.: Revell, 1966], 4:88). Taken together, these two words aptly describe the havoc wrought by false teaching.

Having decided to send the letter, **it seemed good to** the leaders of the Jerusalem fellowship, **having become of one mind, to select men to send to Antioch with their beloved Barnabas and Paul.** That they were **of one mind** about this matter shows again their unity (cf. v. 22). The description of **Barnabas and Paul** as **beloved** shows the affection they felt for these men. The church's commendation of them as **men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ** is the noblest anyone could receive. On their first missionary tour, the two had faced persecution (Acts 13:50), and Paul had nearly been killed (Acts 14:19–20). Willingness to suffer for the cause of Christ was the consistent pattern of their lives.

What made them willing to risk their lives? First, they were concerned for others. To the Philippians Paul wrote, "Even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all" (Phil. 2:17). Second, they knew the path of suffering led to a richer provision of God's grace (2 Cor. 12:9–10). Third, they understood the continuity of eternal life. In Romans 14:7–9 Paul wrote:

For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Knowing that in life or in death they were the Lord's made them fearless. Fourth, they knew that death merely gained them heaven, which they longed for. Paul expressed that hope in Philippians 1:21–23:

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better.

Fifth, they sought to obey Christ at all costs, even when that obedience involved suffering. Peter wrote that believers "have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps" (1 Pet. 2:21; cf. 1 Pet. 3:17; 5:10). Finally, and most significant, they were willing to suffer **for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ** (cf. Phil. 3:10). The **name** of Jesus Christ included all He was and purposed, and it motivated Paul's service (Rom. 1:5), as well as the service of others in the early church (3 John 7). When the apostles suffered persecution, they rejoiced "that they had been considered wor-

thy to suffer shame for His name” (Acts 5:41). No cost was too high to pay to protect the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ.

As had been decided earlier (v. 22), **Judas and Silas** would accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch. They could **report the same things by word of mouth**, thus confirming the letter’s contents by their firsthand report of the proceedings. Then, reflecting the Council’s decision regarding matters of fellowship (vv. 19–21), the letter concluded:

For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell. (15:28–29)

The letter thus answered the doctrinal question raised by the Antioch church and gave wise instruction on how to avoid rifts in the fellowship.

THE DEVELOPMENT

So, when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message. And after they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out. [But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.] But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching, with many others also, the word of the Lord. (15:30–35)

Having been **sent away** with the blessings of the Jerusalem fellowship, the messengers **went down to Antioch**. There, **having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter**. The entire **congregation**, which had been anxiously awaiting the news of whether their salvation was genuine, gathered **together** to hear the apostles’ decision.

The reading of the **letter** and the report of the delegation evoked four responses from the assembled believers. The first was celebration: **they rejoiced**. The confirmation that salvation was indeed by grace alone lifted a tremendous burden of worry from their shoulders. The second response was consolation, **because of** the letter’s **encour-**

agement. They no longer needed to fear that their salvation was not genuine. Legalism produces fear, guilt, and pride, while grace alone brings comfort and hope (2 Thess. 2:16). A third response was confirmation, as **Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message.** The two leaders from Jerusalem added their own heartening words to those of the letter. Then, **after they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out** and returned to Jerusalem. Legalism produces neither confirmation nor edification; it is “the word of His grace” that is “able to build” up believers (Acts 20:32). The final response was continuation. Verse 34 is not in the best manuscripts, but verse 35 notes that **Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching, with many others also, the word of the Lord.** Paul and Barnabas picked up where they had left off and continued their ministry of **teaching and preaching . . . the word of the Lord.** Their teaching made clear that salvation is by grace alone. Luke adds that **many others** joined them in proclaiming the liberating truth of salvation by grace.

The apostolic church thus survived the greatest challenge it had yet faced and established the doctrine of salvation by grace. Satan’s attempt to inject heretical teaching was thwarted. So also was his attempt to split the church along racial and cultural lines. With the vitally important truth about salvation safeguarded, the church experienced greater days of ministry than ever before.

There has always been, and always will be, only one way to be saved. No one expressed that truth any clearer than the apostle Paul when he penned the familiar words, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast” (Eph. 2:8–9).