

50 Days Ablaze! Sermon Series 2
Fifth Mission Response – May 14, 2006
Acts 13:1-5
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“Send” Sermon: “The Fertile Soil of the Sending Church”

We pray. We gather this day, O Lord, to worship...to praise you...to sing of our love to you...that our lips, and our hearts, and our souls might be cleansed by the blood of your Son, Jesus. May these moments with you so fill us with joy, so cleanse us, that we are then the ones to be eager to raise our hands and say, “Here am I. Send me.” Now, Lord Jesus, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts and minds be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

(Interview in front of the congregation with a member who is a vegetable farmer):

Pastor: “Steve . . . why is it that I have a hard time growing beets? I can grow tomatoes. I can grow carrots. But why is it that I have a hard time growing beets? Is there a reason for that?”

Steve: “It could be insects, or it could be the soil itself that limits the growth of the plant.”

Pastor: “Are there certain soils that are good for certain crops?”

Steve: “Sandy loam is good for all crops, but when it comes to peppers, shale soil works because peppers have a shallow root.”

Pastor: “You have a few of those on the farm, right? How many?”

Steve: “70,000 pepper plants. Cucumbers, however, grow in clay soil. They are one of the few vegetables that will grow well in clay.”

Pastor: “Son of a gun. Well, folks, there is your farming lesson for the day in our ‘This Old House’ class. (laughter) Thank you, Steve.”

The reason I’m asking Steve those questions is with this in mind: We are talking today about the word *Send*—that we are people “sent out” . . . that we as a church are to be a “sending church”—and it raises to me these questions:

- What does it take for a church to be a “sending” church?
- What does it take for a church to look beyond its own walls, its own self, and look outside itself?

- Is there a certain “soil” that is necessary in the culture, in the community of a church, in order for it to be a “sending” community?

I think there is . . . because not every church is automatically a “sending” church, or a “sending” people. Not every mother is a “sending” mother. Mothers tend to have to fight that urge to keep the apron strings tied tight. What is it that makes some moms so “sending” and “giving” and “permission-freeing,” and others to hold on so tightly? What is it for churches? What is it for Christians? Open your Bible to a model of a “sending” church in Acts 13 (page ____ in your pew Bibles):

“In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers . . .

I’ll tell you, that’s part of a “sending” church right there. I can think of people in my life—teachers, professors—who had a huge impact on my life, giving me a sense of focus and purpose at a time in my life when I was incredibly confused. The Church need teachers like that. But back to the text . . .

“In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. The two of them, sent on their way by way of the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.”

“John” here is referring to John Mark, the man who wrote the gospel of Mark. It’s interesting—that, too, is part of a “sending” church. You need people, prominent people, who aren’t going to hog the limelight—like Mark, who are just willing to be of assistance and help. They don’t care who gets the credit; they are there just to serve. But here in this text, I see the marks of a “sending” church. I see the type of “soil” that is necessary for a people, for a church to be a “sending” community and not focus it all here [pointing to self]. What are those characteristics?

1. In a sending church, as I look here at Acts 13, the ultimate purpose for the church is not mission . . . it’s **worship**. Now, you’ve got to understand—if you know me well—that’s a little bit of a switch for me. For me to say the ultimate purpose, the focus of everything, is not mission but worship . . . is a little reversal for me . . . because my spiritual gifts include those of an evangelist. I have a burning passion for those who are heading to hell. You know how I’ve challenged us to be in mission. But I’m going to tell you, our ultimate purpose is “worship.” We are a people who are created to be living lives of worship. Turn to Ephesians 1:5, page ____:

“He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will—to the praise of His glorious grace, which He freely gave us in

the One He loves, in order that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be for the praise of His glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is the deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession, to the praise of His glory."

You and I were created for the glory of God. You and I were created to live our lives in such a way that when they see our good deeds . . . this is what Jesus said: Live your life, let your light so shine that when they see your good deeds, they can bring glory to God in heaven. All the attention goes to Him, not us. We were created to live in worship and praise of God. *That* is our ultimate purpose . . . not mission. If we fail to live our lives . . . I'm not talking about Sunday morning, this one hour . . . I'm talking about day-in, day-out, 24/7. If you and I as husbands, as fathers, as men . . . as women, mothers, daughters . . . fail to live lives of worship . . . where we stand in awe before a great God . . . then we're going to begin to trick ourselves into thinking it's all about us, that we can do it on our own strength, that we *must* do it on our own strength. The only way in which you can, indeed, find that your true strength is in God—that you can be fired up to do things with the strength and power of God—is when you live a life of worship and you recognize that life is not all about you . . . rather, it's all about Him.

I'm going to tell you that I believe that when we understand our chief purpose is worship and nothing less than that . . . that worship will then fuel mission. Worship will energize us to be living lives of witness to God. In the *50 Days Ablaze!* devotions, I give witness to something I've told you about before. . . about the time in my life when I had been rather silent with my mother-in-law about faith and didn't know where she stood with God. When we found out she was so ill, we went back to see her, and I remember waking up that morning and saying, "Lord, I've been quiet for 10 years, saying nothing. I submit myself to you this morning. If you give me the chance to talk to her, I'll be your vessel . . . I'll do it."

That prayer was an act of worship, do you understand? Worship is when you declare, "This is what you are worth to me. I surrender everything to you." Worship is when you bow down and say, "I submit to your authority. You're worth more to me than anyone else." At that moment in prayer, I said to the Lord, in a sense, "I don't care what anybody else thinks anymore. I care what You think. Give me the chance and I will be Your vessel." That act of worship was the fuel for my mission . . . the energy, the motivation, the strength I needed to finally, in a stumbling way, give my witness to her. Afterward, what a blessing to hear her say, "I believe that too."

Worship is our ultimate purpose, I believe, in life. If we are going to be a "sending" church, we must understand that worship is central to everything we are and everything we do. John Piper, a theologian of some reputation who has written a lot of great devotional classics, writes these words:

"Mission is not the ultimate goal of the church, worship is. Mission exists because worship does not exist. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not

man. When this age is over and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity, but worship abides forever. Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal in missions. It is the goal of missions. Because in missions we simply aim to bring the nations into the white hot enjoyment of God's glory. Worship is the fuel of missions. Passion for God in worship precedes the offer of God in preaching. You cannot commend to somebody what you don't cherish yourself in your life. The ultimate goal of God in all of history is to uphold and display His glory for the enjoyment of the redeemed from every tribe, every tongue, every people, every nation. His goal is the gladness of His people, because God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him. Because, you see, delight is higher tribute than duty itself."

I believe that worship is critical to becoming a "sending" church. What do I mean by worship? Let's park here for one more moment. I don't mean worship like this [hands stretched out, signifying the room]. I mean worship where we are in a rhythmic encounter with God. He approaches us . . . we respond . . . He approaches us . . . we respond. We have a sense of being in a holy place.

Let me give you an example: Moses. Let me take you to a worship moment with Moses. He's tending his sheep; he's doing his normal job. He looks at a bush burning. But it's not "burning up." He goes near, and God says, "*Moses, take your shoes off because you are standing on holy ground.*" What made it holy? What made that ground holy? It was the proximity to God. God initiates. Moses responds. Now God says, "*I want you to go to My people.*" Moses says, "No way . . . huh-uh." The excuses fly. God initiates. Moses responds. God initiates. Moses responds. Finally, when all of this is done, the result of all this is . . . what? Moses goes out in mission.

Let me take you to another worship moment with Isaiah in the temple. Isaiah is the Billy Graham of his day. Isaiah is the godliest of all people of his day. There's nobody more righteous than Isaiah. He goes into the temple, and he sees a vision of God—a worship imagery: seraphim and cherubim flying around. What does Isaiah say? "*Woe is me for I'm a man of unclean lips. I'm ruined. I'm a sinner.*" What's God do? See, now here comes that initiative of God. God initiates. He brings the coal from the altar and touches Isaiah's lips, cleanses him. Then God initiates again: "I have a mission. I need a (it's a little children's sermon) . . . I need a volunteer." Isaiah says, "I'll do it, I'll do it . . . please, please, please, pick me, pick me, pick me, please pick me." Don't you see . . . that's a worship moment. God initiates. Man responds. God initiates. Man responds. And the result is mission. Worship fuels mission. Always. Abraham with Isaac. It's a worship moment. God initiates. Abraham responds. And it results in worship. And it results in Abraham being the vessel of God and nothing less than that.

I believe if you and I are going to have a sense of being "sent" this week, it will be when you and I live lives of worship 24/7 . . . when we are constantly experiencing those moments when God initiates with us, and we have a sense of standing on holy ground . . . and out of that, when we receive His cleansing by the blood of Jesus, we are going to be the little kids

raising our hands saying, “Pick me, pick me, pick me.” If we aren’t living lives of worship, then we will never live with a life of being “sent.” We won’t feel *worthy* . . . we won’t feel *empowered* . . . because it’s all about *us*.

2. The second characteristic is like unto the first. The fertile soil of a “sending” church is not only worshipful—it’s prayerful. **Prayer** is the atmosphere surrounding the “sending” church. [Breathing in deeply] The atmosphere here is filled with oxygen. [Breathing in deeply again] Just breathe it in. If I go down to the gym, it’s the same atmosphere. There’s oxygen down there. It’s everywhere in this building. I want us to view prayer as being the spiritual atmosphere in which we move, that no matter where we go, whatever we do, prayer permeates everything—everything! I believe that when you look at Acts 13 . . . go back to that text, Acts 13, verse 1:

“In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen,” then verse 2, *“while they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work I have called them to do.’ So after they had fasted and after they had prayed . . .”*

Folks, I said this to you a few weeks ago: Prayer is not preparation for the battle. Prayer *is* the battle. I was preparing for a presentation recently, and I wanted to spend a day working on the presentation, getting it set. As it happened, I had very little time to actually take out my papers and work on it. However, I had devoted that morning to some time of significant prayer about the topic I was working on. Later in the day, someone asked me, “Did you have a chance to work on the presentation?” I said, “No, I didn’t.” And then in that conversation, I thought . . . yes I did! I did! I spent time in prayer! Prayer is not only the battle . . . *Prayer is the work!* Why is it that we see prayer as something less than the critical matter itself? Why do we see prayer as something to be added on or an “extra” rather than as the battle and the work itself? In prayer, I’m seeking God’s words, not mine . . . God’s guidance, not mine. Why isn’t prayer permeating our lives?

The early Christian Church spent their time in prayer and fasting. Fasting is a lost discipline. Luther did it. Why don’t Lutherans do it? Moses did it. Jesus did it. Elijah did it. Peter did it. Paul did it. Why don’t Lutherans do it? Fasting has been abused over the years. Some people taught that you fast in order to get closer to God. Some people said you fast in order to be a better Christian or to show that you’re a stronger Christian. Some people said you fast in order to merit salvation. That’s just hogwash. Biblically, what I understand about fasting is this: People who fast—who go without food and devote that time to being in intense prayer—are people who recognize that they need to fast because they’re not hungry for God. They recognize that there are too many other things satisfying their appetite, that they’re just not hungry and ravenous for God. So they go without food for awhile, and when the hunger stabs or the stomach begins to growl, they take their minds off of it by focusing intensely on the Word and hungering after Him. They fast from food in order to feast on God.

When you fast, you don’t go around bragging about it . . . because, really, what you’re doing is admitting that you’re not hungry for God, so you’ve got to discipline your weakness.

The early Christians were so hungry, so craving for God, for His Word, for His instruction, that they devoted themselves to hours of prayer and fasting to make sure that their mission wasn't of their own design but was being guided and led by God. I believe that a "sending" church is a church that is filled with worship and intense, deep prayer.

I read the biography of Billy Graham recently. At one point Billy Graham was being interviewed on the Today Show. They ushered him into the "Green Room," where they prepare someone before their interview, and they said, "We have a chaplain here who wants to come in, and we prepared a special room for you just to be in prayer, because we figured you want to pray before the TV show." All of the people who surround Billy Graham laughed and said, "You don't understand. From the moment he got up this morning . . . from the moment he got up this morning, he has been in constant prayer. He doesn't need a special room. It's not a *thing* he does, it's the *life* he breathes." It's so telling to me that prayer was just a constant with him. It was the air he breathes because he understood that verse in Ephesians we read a couple of weeks ago—Prayer is not preparation for the battle . . . it *is* the battle.

Satan doesn't want us to pray. Satan does not want us to seek comfort in the arms of Jesus. The last thing Satan wants is for you to find comfort or strength in the arms of Jesus! But when you pray, pray like this: "Jesus I pray in *your* name." That's not just an "abracadabra" magical formula that when you pray you close by saying, "In the name of Jesus." I believe that when you and I pray and we end our prayers saying, "I ask this in the name of Jesus," literally what we are saying is, "Jesus, You understand. You understand what it's like to be me! You understand what it's like to live this life, but you just never blew it! You never messed up!" When you and I pray in the name of Jesus, we are asking nail-pierced hands to be held up before our Father in heaven to remind Him that *we* who are praying are the ones that Jesus died for. When we pray in the name of Jesus, we are saying to Satan—who is trying to battle with us at that very moment of prayer—"Get out of my face! Get out of my face in the name of Jesus! He is my help and my strength." Because when you pray in the name of Jesus, Satan can't stand to be in your presence . . . because he's either got to kneel with you in prayer or get out of the room. Prayer is not preparation for the battle. It *is* the battle! It *is* the work! It's the most important work if we are to be a "sending" church.

If we want to send anybody else to New Orleans or to Saltillo . . . or if we want to have a sense of being sent when we leave here—with a sense of purpose—it comes first and foremost when we understand that we are to live lives of worship each and every moment, encountering this holy God who comes to us to cleanse us, and when we then spend our day breathing in the air of prayer.

3. Now, when I look at Acts 13, I also see leaders in this church who understand their role. That's the third characteristic. The role of leadership in a "sending" church is more one of **preparation** than it is of planning or programming. You know, years ago, when I got out of the seminary, I thought my job as a pastor was to lead churches in long-range planning and strategic thinking. I like doing that kind of stuff. I like anticipating two to three years from now. But you know what I'm beginning to understand? My role as a pastor is not so much to

help you in planning and programming, but rather in preparing—spiritual preparation. I think that if Pastor Jason and I can help you be spiritually prepared—to train and teach you in the Word of God . . . to help you understand the whole will of God . . . to bring you God’s law to convict you of your sin, only then to bring you the Good News, found in the blood of Christ, to cleanse you—if we can spiritually prepare you so that when the Holy Spirit prompts you and opens that door of opportunity for you, you’re ready to say, “I’m here!”

What is it about little kids that causes them to be able to raise their hands and volunteer for something when they don’t even know what they are going to be asked to do? I think it’s that they trust the guy asking for the volunteer! And I think those kids are without any guilt, any fear. With our heavenly Father . . . do you think we need to be afraid? And we don’t need to be with guilt. When our Father asks us, can we not say, “Use me . . . however . . . ?” The most honoring prayer of worship you can offer to the Lord this day is to say, “Lord, however you want to use me this day . . . blank check . . . use me.” Just don’t pray that prayer unless you’re serious . . . because He’ll show you some pretty wild and weird things—not to hurt you. Look at Jeremiah 29:11: “*‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord. ‘Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’*” When you say to the Lord, “I’m here . . . use me however you want,” it’s not as though God finally says, “Oh good. I’ve been waiting for this moment for years. Now I’m going to crush you.” It’s not that way.

50 Days Ablaze! is more about preparation than it is programming. We are in these 50 Days to prepare us so that when the Holy Spirit gives us the next opportunity, we’re the ones ready to respond. How could we—a year ago, during our first 50 Days journey—ever have planned for what happened this past year? Let me mention to you three things: coats, water, shoes. The coats were given to the kids on The Island [a reference to the city]. We gave coats, what . . . 20, 30, 40 coats? Mary Jean came to me and asked, “Can we do another coat drive?” I said, “Yeah . . . I don’t think we are going to do very much.” What did we do that second time around? A couple hundred!! Water to New Orleans—six 18-wheelers full!! Shoes—to Pastor Unity’s church in Tanzania. By the way, it took six months for the shoes to get there, but they did arrive. They were so happy! Who could have planned for that kind of stuff? But we were spiritually prepared, so that when the Lord gave us the opportunity and gave us the nudging, we were able to say, “Use us!” I think that’s what a “sending” church is all about. It’s more about being spiritually prepared to be the open vessel.

4. And finally, this . . . I think “sending” churches realize that effectiveness and faithfulness are measured **more by sending than by seating**. I’ll make a confession to you: In my early days of ministry with you, after you would leave on a Sunday morning, one of the first things I would do is go right around the corner back there in the entry of the church and check the attendance chart to see how many people had been *seated* here that day. That was always such a critically important number to me. Did we do better this week than last week? How many did we seat? I still look at the number. I don’t go back there any longer. I wait a few days and read it when you do in here [holding up the announcements]. But now I operate by a different score card. How many we *seat* is not as important as how many we *send*. Will you this day go out of here with a sense of being “sent” by God into your mission field, ready to

do whatever He asks you to do? Wouldn't it be awesome if next week in the bulletin announcements we could write down how many left worship with the sense of being *sent!*? That, to me, is effectiveness. That, to me, is faithfulness. How do we prepare ourselves? Full circle—it goes to this last Bible verse I want you to look at, Isaiah 6:5-8 on page ____:

“‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined. For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.’ Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, ‘See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.’ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. send me!’”

It's not a live burning coal that's touched *your* lips. It's the *chalice*; it's the *cup* with the *wine*. It's the *host*. It's the *bread* that has touched your lips. With that God has said, “Your sins are atoned for, paid for by My Son. The guilt is removed from you completely.” And it is with this gift of forgiveness and atonement that God now raises the question, “Whom will I send? Who will go for Me?” And without guilt, and with great joy and gladness, we can then say to Him, “Here am I . . . Here am I . . . please, please, please, pick me!” Amen.