

Merge

*“This is the way, walk in it,”
(Isaiah 30:21 ESV)*

*“And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness;
the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they
are fools, they shall not go astray.”
(Isaiah 35:8 ESV)*

*“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”
(Matthew 16:24 ESV)*

Overflow Church
December 1st, 2024
Acts 13:1-3
Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have a Bible with you, I'd love for you to open it now to Acts 13:1-3; that's on page 921 in the church Bibles. For the last 12 weeks we've been working our way through this MERGE series. The purpose of this series has been to help people get up to speed – with God, first and foremost, but also with us and so for the last couple of weeks now, we've been talking about the church. We talked about how the church is a family, the church is the Body of Christ, and the church is a holy nation. Our job is not to “make the nation holy” – our job is to BE A HOLY NATION. To be God's people. To build a community of contrast. To call people out of darkness into his marvellous light.

That's what we believe about “THE CHURCH” – but this week, in our last week in this series, I want to talk about THIS CHURCH. Now of course, THIS CHURCH is a local manifestation of THE CHURCH, so everything we've said about THE CHURCH is true of us – or at least OUGHT to be true of us. Growth for us, is about BECOMING WHO WE ARE. So we want to BECOME a family, we want to function LIKE THE BODY OF CHRIST, we want to BE A HOLY NATION. All of that is TRUE and by God's grace, is BECOMING true of us, by one degree of glory to the next. But within that GENERAL MOVEMENT, we do have here a particular sense of vision. God has put something on our heart that serves as a sort of

“aspirational target” and that has done, since about 2010. For about 15 years now we have used the phrase “Overflow Church” as a sort of shorthand to describe the sort of church that we aspire to become. Our heart’s desire is to be BLESSED so that we can be a BLESSING. Sometimes we will lengthen our tagline out and talk about how we GATHER so that we can GROW, GIVE and GO – that’s just a LONGER way of talking about OVERFLOW CHURCH. We gather together around God to receive GRACE so that we can GROW, GIVE and GO out into the world and into mission. The church in Antioch was the original Overflow Church and it is this picture, perhaps more than any other, that informs our sense of vision and calling in this place. So hopefully you have your Bibles open by now to Acts 13. I’ll be reading verses 1-3. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” 3 Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13:1-3 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

As I mentioned, in this passage we have an illustration or a picture of the original overflow church.

A Picture Of An Overflow Church

There are three characteristics in particular that I want you to notice. First of all we see that:

1. An overflow church develops surplus capacity

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. (Acts 13:1 ESV)

That’s quite a lineup!

Barnabas of course was the guy who sold off his ancestral estate in Acts 4 to fund the massive expansion of the deacon ministry in Acts 6. His act of generosity was so remarkable that it actually tempted Ananias and Saphira to imitate it, hoping to receive similar acclaim – we remember how that story turned out. But Barnabas now is serving up in Antioch – he is arguably the most famous man in Christendom outside of the 12 apostles.

Alongside him we have Simeon who was called Niger – who is thought by many to be the Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross of Jesus Christ back in Luke 23:26. Can you imagine hearing a sermon from the man who had literally stood shoulder to shoulder with Jesus under the weight of the cross? Who had looked into his eyes, breathed his breath and tasted his sweat on that fateful day? He was an incredibly important witness in the first generation of the church – and his sons became notable leaders as well – we know that from Mark 15:21. So in addition to the most generous guy in Christendom they also have arguably the most **COMPELLING GOSPEL WITNESS** on the planet

Now as for Lucius of Cyrene – we don't actually know anything about him, but he may have been the brother of Simon of Cyrene.

Manaen, who is mentioned next in verse 1, is described by Luke as a life-long friend of Herod the tetrarch – the Greek word translated in the ESV there as “lifelong friend” can also mean “foster brother”; noble sons were often raised in the homes of other noble families so as to strengthen the ties that connected powerful houses to each other and so we believe that this person was **RAISED** in the same home as Herod – the Herod who executed John the Baptist and who conspired with Pilate to crucify Jesus – so like Simon of Cyrene he was a very important witness to the climactic events of the gospel.

Oh, and then there was this other guy – some guy named Saul, or Paul as he was often called. Who became, without a doubt, the most important missionary and theologian in the history of the Christian movement.

Again - that's quite a roster!

Can you imagine going to that church?

Who is preaching the sermon today? The guy who helped to carry the cross of Jesus or the guy who was sitting next to Herod when he ordered the execution of John the Baptist? Or will it be the Apostle Paul?

Can you imagine that?

That's a church that had developed a surplus of capacity!

And they did develop it. The Apostle Paul was not the Apostle Paul at this point in the story – he was a Jewish Bible Geek that a lot of people weren't sure they could trust – but the leaders of the church of Antioch took a chance on him. Luke tells us that in Acts 11:25:

So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. (Acts 11:25-26 ESV)

The leaders of that church saw something in Saul that no one else did. They had surplus capacity in Antioch because they DEVELOPED surplus capacity in Antioch and that is what you have to do if you want to be an overflow church.

The second thing I want you to see here is that:

2. An overflow church listens and responds to the Spirit

Look at verse 2:

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” (Acts 13:2 ESV)

The connection between the release of Saul and Barnabas and this season of prayer and fasting is by no means accidental – because of course, it would never naturally occur to anyone, in the flesh, to give away their best people.

That’s not what organizations do.

Organizations have a strong instinct to protect and grow themselves. That’s human nature. We know this. This is why government bureaucracies grow and sprawl and eventually have to be blown up before the whole country collapses under the economic strain. This is why denominations become bloated and ineffective – and it can happen to churches as well. There is such a thing as over feeding yourself. There is such a thing as too much safety. It is entirely possible for organizations to coddle and protect themselves to death.

Our instincts in this sense are corrupted – and that’s why a decision like this could only come from the Holy Spirit. There is no way that this decision would have come out of a business meeting. Churches don’t VOTE to give away their 40% of their assets – that kind of courage – that kind of sacrifice only makes sense to people who are living their lives in step with the Spirit.

I don’t think it would untrue or unfair to say that OVERGROWN churches are listening to themselves while OVERFLOW churches are listening to the Spirit because THE SELF says: “Hold on to everything God gives you”; while the Spirit says:

“Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul” (Acts 13:2 ESV)

And that leads to the third thing I want you to see here:

3. An overflow church releases people into ministry and mission

Look at verse 3:

Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.
(Acts 13:3 ESV)

So launched the first missionary journey of Barnabas and Saul. If you've read the Acts of the Apostles then you know that Barnabas and Saul/Paul planted churches all over the eastern half of the Mediterranean world. Through their efforts the Lord moved to bring hundreds and thousands of Gentile believers into the Kingdom of God. In fact, they were so successful that it fundamentally changed the makeup and constitution of the church. Prior to Paul and Barnabas setting out the church was almost exclusively Jewish – but through their work and ministry so many Gentiles were converted that a special church council had to be called in Acts 15. Can you imagine that? Wouldn't it be wonderful to see so many young people, or so many immigrants or so many Muslims converted that we would have to call a **GENERAL COUNCIL OF THE CHURCH** to figure out how to manage that?

Lord GIVE US PROBLEMS LIKE THAT in our day!

As the story goes on we learn that Paul and Barnabas had a disagreement about how best to balance the need for leadership development with the need for productivity and reliability on their staff. I. Howard Marshall says here:

“It is a classic example of the perpetual problem of whether to place the interests of the individual or of the work as a whole first, and there is no rule of thumb for dealing with it.”¹

Who was right in that situation – Barnabas or Paul?

The Bible doesn't tell us – because it really does **DEPEND**. These are the sorts of **VERY DIFFICULT** decisions you end up having to make when you try to be an **OVERFLOW CHURCH**. In this case, rather than fight it out to the end, Paul and Barnabas decide to divide and conquer on their second trip out, with Barnabas going one way with John Mark, and Paul going the other way accompanied by Silas.

According to church history, Barnabas didn't make it the whole way around. He was martyred in Cyprus, stoned by the Jews outside the synagogue in Salamis. Paul, with his ever-growing team of young pastors and preachers, went on to plant churches all over Asia Minor and even into

¹I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 274.

Europe. The letters he wrote to those churches form the bulk of what we today call “The New Testament”.

All that, launched out of one church in Antioch of Syria.

All that because one congregation decided to give away two fifths of their leadership team in support of the Great Commission.

That’s overflow church!

So what will it take for us to remain an overflow church?

What Will It Take For Us To Remain An Overflow Church?

And I use the word REMAIN because I think, by God’s grace, we HAVE been an overflow church for much of our history and particularly over the last several years. We made a commitment several years ago now to give 20% of our budget to missions which is about twice the national average. We made a commitment to plant churches and to develop leaders – many of whom – most of whom – will end up serving in other places.

That’s overflow church – and it’s hard!

I’ve told you before, I MOURNED when we finally released RCC a number of years ago, back in the pandemic. I rejoiced AND I mourned – because of the people who went. For those of you who are new, you may not know this story. Back in September of 2012 about 60 people from here went down to the school gym at OCS to begin, what became Redeemer City Church. A lot of my favourite people were part of that plant. A lot of my best friends were part of that plant. Matt and Jil Koller were at our wedding – we’ve been friends for years – and yet they made the decision to be a part of that plant group. I’m still a little bit offended by that.

Over the years we sent more people down there – they went out from here in waves. We sent some of our best leaders down there. Pastor Levi was our Assistant Worship Pastor here at Cornerstone. We all had dreams of him maybe taking over for Pastor Jody one day, but we asked

him if he would like to learn to preach and BOY DID HE EVER LEARN TO PREACH and now he is the Lead Pastor down there and doing great.

That's overflow church – and it hurts. It costs. It takes faith. And it takes wisdom too – because of course, you know, it is possible to give too much. Right? Donating half a litre of blood is a very nice thing to do. Donating 2 litres of blood is a very stupid thing to do – because you will die. And then you won't be able to give any blood next month or the month after that – so WISDOM and FAITH have to go together.

So what will that look like?

What will we need to do here at Cornerstone for us to remain and improve as an overflow church?

There is a lot we could say here, but I want to draw your attention to these three things in particular. First of all, if we are going to be an overflow church than we are going to need to normalize sacrifice and service.

1. We need to normalize sacrifice and service

Last week I had the opportunity to attend something called “The Pipeline Symposium” last week up at MBC. It was a gathering of pastors, seminary presidents and denominational leaders from across Canada who had come together to discuss the present shortage of young people going into ministry. There is a “pipeline crisis” in Canada – as some of you will know. Now part of that is just demographics – for every 10 Baby Boomer pastors that are retiring right now there are only 7 Gen X pastors like me to replace them and so three Millennial pastors are going to have to shuffle up a little earlier than they would have done in previous generations, and that is leaving bigger and bigger GAPS at the bottom of the pyramid for the simple reason that we don't have nearly as many young people going into ministry as once we did.

There are several reasons for that.

One of the main reasons is simple economics. It takes 7 years of post-secondary education to become a pastor – at least in the traditional stream – so given the costs of education, that results in significant student debt. It’s a big ask to say to a young guy: “I want you to take on \$80,000 in school debt, then I’ll give you an entry level job paying \$58,000/year and you’ll need to try and buy a house in this town for \$750,000.”

If the young person can do math, then he may not be very interested in that proposition – because it’s not going to work, so economics is a factor – but so too is our obsession with EASE and COMFORT. A number of people in that room talked about the fact that young people today want to make as much money as they can with the least amount of effort possible. And by the way, when I shared that finding with our younger pastors here, they all told me that it is exactly right. Apparently there are TikTok channels and Social Media influencers advising young people how to make money with the least amount of time and energy put in – and this is what young people want.

And this is what their parents want.

Time and again at that meeting I heard seminary professors and presidents talking about how PARENTS have become a significant obstacle in recruiting young people into the ministry. Parents WANT their kids to get EASY, HIGH PAYING JOBS and to live COMFORTABLE STRESS FREE LIVES and so becoming a pastor doesn’t exactly fit the bill.

But then again, if that is your criteria, then being a Christian doesn’t exactly fit the bill either – because didn’t Jesus say:

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?”
(Matthew 16:24-26 ESV)

That’s Christianity in a nutshell!

Following Jesus is HARD NOW and EASY LATER.

Following JESUS is BLOOD NOW and BLESSING LATER.

Following Jesus is CROSS NOW and CROWN LATER – how have we forgotten this? Parents: why are we not teaching this to our children?

What good will it do your child to be RICH NOW and to ROT for all eternity in hell?

Is that too harsh?

Take it up with Jesus.

Young people, can I just talk to you for a second? You know that one day you will stand before Jesus and give an account for how you have lived your life – you know that right? You know that you will have to talk to him about how you have used your time, treasures and TALENTS – and there is a story in the Bible about a guy who did nothing with the gifts he'd been entrusted with. Do you remember how that story ends? The Master took everything from him and said:

cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 25:30 ESV)

I hope your parents have told you that – but if they haven't, I want you to hear it now. If you live like this LIFE IS ALL YOU GET THEN THIS LIFE IS ALL YOU GET. But if you live like the gospel is true, then you get this life and everything you could ever ask for, hope for or imagine in the next.

That's true – and if we want to be an overflow church – if we want to be any kind of VITAL and LIVING church, we need to tell that truth and we need to act like we believe it.

And secondly, if we want to be an overflow church:

2. We need to invest in the development and education of young people

I heard that over and over and over again in the conversations I was a part of at the Pipeline Symposium. Churches have to invest in the development and education of their young people. And I'm not just talking about seminary here – I'm not just talking about training up vocational pastors – I'm talking about developing and training leaders of every gift and kind. We need a surplus of those leaders if we are going to be an overflow church! We need more Eric Scotts leading services at Sundial; we need more Adam Rogersons preaching sermons down at Coldwater; we need more Pippa Wagners teaching the gospel to our children down in CM – we need MORE LEADERS OF EVERY KIND if we are going to be an overflow church.

Leaders like that have to be developed and trained. That's why we have programs like B1, B2 and B3. That's why we have T2, D3 and E3. That's why we have internships, Titus Scholarships and Timothy Bursaries – because you have to invest in every step of the process if you want to one day have the surplus of leaders that you will need to be an overflow church.

We gave away 4 elected elders when we planted Redeemer City Church. It wasn't just Pastor Levi, it was Keith Giffen, Matt Koller, Dr. Gary Peysar and Harry Sawatsky – all of whom had been trained and developed here at this church. There would have been no plant in 2012 without leadership development in 2006,7,8,9 and 10. You need surplus capacity to do the kind of work we feel called to do in this place. If you are only recruiting and training enough leaders to replace the people you've already got then you have made the decision not to grow; you have made the decision not to overflow.

Training and developing young people takes time, intentionality and money, but there is no way around that if you want to be an overflow church.

And then thirdly, and lastly, if you want to be an overflow church then you need to be ever being filled with the Holy Spirit.

3. We need to be ever being filled with the Spirit

Paul wrote that to the church of Ephesus in Ephesians 5:18, but long before he wrote that, he LIVED THAT. His entire MINISTRY was birthed and fuelled by supplies of the Spirit. That takes us right back to where we started this morning. It was the Holy Spirit, in verse 3, who said:

“Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul” (Acts 13:2 ESV)

We will never do the things we need to do to be an overflow church unless we do them GUIDED, INSPIRED and EMPOWERED by the Holy Spirit of Jesus.

To be an overflow church there has to be FLOW and SUPPLY – and we only receive that in so far as we are united to Christ through faith. It is in our UNION with Christ and our ABIDING in Christ that we receive all that we need in order to grow, give and go as an overflow church. And so we need to gather. We need to abide. We need to worship.

There is a relationship between worship and mission; we’ve talked about this before. John Piper said famously:

“Mission exists because worship doesn’t.”²

Meaning that we do MISSION to EXTEND THE WORSHIP OF GOD. We go OUT to bring others IN.

Mission exists because worship doesn’t.

I think that’s true!

But I also think that saying is true when you reverse it. I think it is also true to say that WORSHIP exists because MISSION doesn’t. You see, mission is HARD. Mission is COSTLY. Mission is dangerous and so there is NO EARTHLY REASON why we should do it. And so if we are EVER GOING TO DO IT, then we need to catch a vision of eternity. We need to SEE the LORD high and lifted up. We need to SEE the Lamb standing as though it had been slain in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures. We need a vision of HEAVEN if we are ever going to serve God in the blood and muck of earth.

² <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/missions-exists-because-worship-doesnt-a-bethlehem-legacy-inherited-and-bequeathed>

Because it is a very high call.

It is a VERY high call!

To take up your cross and follow him – to LOSE YOUR LIFE for the sake of the kingdom – to do that will require GRACE and MERCY from on high.

And so sometimes WORSHIP exists because MISSION doesn't.

Worship exists so that we can SEE and RECEIVE before we GIVE and GO.

Those are the rhythms of an overflow church.

Blessings in – blessings out.

Spirit in – service out.

That's OVERFLOW CHURCH!

That's who we are – that's who we want to be.

For the glory of the Lord, and for the good of all people – O God, help!

Let's pray together.