

Acts 12:24–13:5

Introduction

Introduction to the Text

Last week, I talked about the difficulty of following Jesus. We saw from God's word that the only thing harder than following Jesus, the only thing more difficult and more dangerous is NOT following Jesus. And in part, that idea was suggested by 12:24. "But the word of God increased and multiplied."

Verse 24 is a transitional text.

1. Chapter 9 turned from talking about Saul and begin to recount some of the events that were taking place with Peter and other disciples. This verse transitions us back to talking about Saul.
2. The verse also demonstrates another sort of transition; namely, that even under the severest persecution – such as that taking place under Herod – nothing can thwart the hand of God.

Introduction to the Question

What does "the word of God increased and multiplied" mean? Does it mean that the church increased in numbers, or as we pastors say, that it increased in terms of nickels and noses?

It does NOT say that. That did happen in earlier chapters, by 3000 and by 5000 in two separate events.¹ In fact, Luke makes a distinction between the a) word of God growing and multiplying, and, b) the number of disciples growing and multiplying.

And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem²

¹ Acts 2:41 and 4:4.

² Acts 6:7.

The text says that the “word of God” is what increased. I want us to look at what this text says about the metrics of church growth.

A metric is defined as “a system or standard of measurement”. One of the most difficult problems that pastors face is the problem of defining a system or standard of measurement for effectiveness in the work of Christ.

We know that we are being watched. And particularly for those of us who make our livings from ministry, we often feel compelled to justify our existence.

The same question or problem applies to all of us. How do we know that we are being effective Christian parents, neighbors, citizens of community and state?

In other contexts, having a metric is really easy.

- When I worked in retail, the metric was how many cameras we sold.
- When I worked in fundraising, the metric was how much money I raised.
- When I worked in construction, the metric was how many feet of irrigation canal we dug.
- When I worked for a company that made boxes, the metric was how many board feet of corrugated paper we turned into boxes.

So, what is the metric of effectiveness in the work of Christ’s church? Are **we** effective Christians?

Let’s take a look at these verses in Acts 12–13.

Examples

12:25–13:3 give us five examples of what it looks like with the word of God is increasing and multiplying.

- Gospel Work is Being Done
- Diversity of Gifts Being Exercised
- Diversity of Workers
- Leadership is developed and sent
- Growth is Spiritually Driven

Gospel Work is Being Done: 12:25

Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.

In chapter 9, due to the threats against his life, the church had sent Saul back to his hometown of Tarsus.³

In chapter 11,⁴ Barnabas had been sent to Antioch from Jerusalem, because many had been turning to the Lord there. When he saw that the grace of God had been poured out in that city, needing help, he went to find Saul in Tarsus and to bring him back.

Barnabas found Saul and, after taking much needed material relief to the Christians who were suffering under a drought in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch.⁵

Take note that Tarsus is in modern day Turkey and north of Antioch. Jerusalem is far south of Antioch, in Israel. That means that Barnabas and Saul had to travel through Antioch down to Jerusalem first. In total, by the time they had returned to Antioch, they traveled over a thousand miles.

What do we gather from this? Gospel work is being done! By gospel work, I mean two things.

1. First, it's the good news, the gospel message about Jesus and the kingdom of God.
2. Second, it means gospel deeds, such as those mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 25, when he refers to giving food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger, clothing for the naked, visiting the sick, attending to those in prison.⁶

Persecution did not shut down preaching and teaching. Persecution increased the distribution of God's word.⁷

This is the first metric to which we are introduced after reading "the word of God increased and multiplied". Gospel work is being done.

³ 9:26–31.

⁴ 11:19–30.

⁵ 12:25.

⁶ Matthew 25:31 ff.

⁷ Acts 11:19.

Diversity of Gifts Being Exercised: 13:1

Second, a diversity of gifts were being exercised. Here 2 are mentioned: prophets and teachers of the word of God.

The “word of God” pretty much what you expect that it is. That phrase is used to refer to at least these things.

- The word of God written, as when a NT reference refers to the 10 commandments in the OT.⁸
- The word of God revealed and written forms the basis of the other two facets of the word of God.
- The teaching of the word of God.⁹ Teaching can refer to what we preachers call the indicative, an ethical standard, perhaps, or a certain kind of conduct, objectively presented, indicating what God says about something.
- The prophetic word of God, which goes beyond the truth in mere propositional form. This is what we preachers call the imperative, what one is to do or say as a result of the indicative, demanding a response: repentance, for instance, or a change in one’s manner of life.¹⁰

These are not the only ways that the word of God can be ministered. Paul adds to teachers and prophets, listing apostles, evangelists, and shepherds. In fact, not only do these particular folks equip the saints for the work of ministry, we all — “the whole body” — does the work of equipping, making “the body grow so that it builds itself up in love”.¹¹

The body of Christ, the church, is an orchestra with many instruments, each playing its part and role faithfully. It is not a one-man band or a single instrument playing a solo.

But here, another evidence that the word of God increased and multiplied is a diversity of gifts being expressed for the sake of the body as a whole.

⁸ Matthew 15:3–6.

⁹ Luke 5:1, in the parable of the soils “seed” refers to the word of God.

¹⁰ Luke 3:2–3.

¹¹ Ephesians 4:11–16.

Diversity of Workers: 13:1

Third, there are a diversity of workers.

- Barnabas is well known to us.
- But who are “Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene”? The Bible doesn’t tell us. This is the only place which references these two men. The only thing we can gather about them is that they are from Africa. “Niger” comes from a Latin word meaning black. And Cyrene is a city in Libya.
- And Manaen! What’s interesting about him is that he is a close friend of Herod’s. I don’t know what your translation says, but he is described in Greek is one who had the same nurse as Herod, literally he was “nursed together” with Herod. The foster brother? The son of a close friend of the family? We don’t know. But you understand that one of the named Associates doing important work in Antioch is a man who is very close to one of the prime enemies of the church!
- And then of course there is Saul.

Let’s put this in context. We have Barnabas, a Jewish Christian. We have two black men from Africa. We have a close friend or associate of a primary enemy of the church. And we have a man who only a short few years earlier was murdering Christians with great zeal. It would be hard to imagine a more diverse group!

There was a diversity of workers, not just a diversity of tasks. And the body of Christ embraced this diversity.

They, like we in the modern church, didn’t always do that, of course. Earlier there was pushback about Gentiles being converted. And we will see similar pushback again in Acts. But such resistance to diversity is never commended. It is the diversity that is commended.

Since 1985, I’ve often been shocked by the overt statement that such and such a place is MY church, as if the speaker held the deed to the body of Christ.

I’m not talking about sensitivity training, or diversity classes. I’m talking about the fact that the church is never about YOU, but always about US, and it’s

about THEM: those who are not yet following Christ.

The preeminent concern of the church is Christ. As Paul says to the Colossians:

*Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.*¹²

Another evidence that the word of God increased and multiplied is the diversity of workers.

Leadership is Developed and Sent: 13:2–3

The Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

At first glance, this may not seem like much. But remember that even though we need a clear chain of command, we don't typically like it when we are not at the top of the chain of command.

Here, the church was willing to set aside and then send leadership. The church of Christ has respect for those who are called and sent as particular leaders.

*If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.*¹³

And those who are called and sent always have a respect for those whom they serve.

The mind-set of “we versus they”, clergy versus lay, lay leadership versus congregants, committee or group leaders versus those who are in the committees or groups is poison to a church.

By the way, when Saul and Barnabas were sent, the responsibility of the church in Antioch did not cease. Other than the Corinthians, the indication is that Paul was supported by many other churches in his various missionary journeys and work. On top of that, we have every reason to believe that the church in Antioch was very much involved in providing relief for Jerusalem during the

¹² Colossians 3:11.

¹³ 1 Timothy 3:1.

drought and the famine that followed.

Another evidence that the word of God increased and multiplied is that leadership is developed and sent willingly.

Growth is Spiritually Driven: 13:2–3

The final evidence we see in these verses that the word of God was increasing and multiplying is that everything being done was driven by godly spirituality.

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." Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

They were declaring the worth of the Lord (worshiping) and sacrificing an aspect of their lifestyles (fasting) and clearly open to God's direction. The Holy Spirit spoke to them in some fashion and they did what they were told.

Then Barnabas and Saul were sent off in the same context of worship.

Surely there are aspects of human wisdom that can be brought to bear in the body of Christ. Prudent use of money, sound judgment in the making of decisions, weighing the pros and cons of a situation, taking advantage of those with a more mature faith, and those with more experience. But all of these things are filtered through or seen in the light of the worship of God's wisdom, indeed, God's word.

The fifth evidence that the word of God increased and multiplied is that it was undergirded by godly worship, prayer, and fasting.

Conclusion

Notice that these examples are all "can do" items. Discussed this back in chapter 2 after Pentecost. Some things we can control, some not.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their

*possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*¹⁴

“Controllable”

- Devoted to teaching
- Fellowship
- Breaking of bread
- The prayers
- Sharing with those who had need
- Attending temple together
- Sharing meals

“Not controllable”

- Awe
- Signs and wonders
- Having favor with all the people
- Numbers being added

St. John’s, how are we doing?

¹⁴ Acts 2:42–47.