

“A Place of Prayer,” Acts 13:1-3, 16:11-13 (Commissioning Service for Casey Russell, May 27, 2018)

Today is a different service from any we’ve ever had at Grace Bible Church, at least in the seven-plus years I’ve been here. Today we are setting apart a man, Casey Russell, and commissioning him to go to Las Vegas and ultimately start a new church there. We have three talks this morning: mine, Jim’s (where he will give a charge to the church on how we can participate in this work), and Joel Strahan’s talk. Joel is originally from Shreveport, Louisiana, and has served as the pastor of Slayden Baptist Church since October 2017. Before that Joel and his wife Heather served in Moscow, Russia, with the IMB for three years. Joel will give a charge to Casey.

What I hope to show you over the next twelve minutes or so is an overview of this process: first, why we are commissioning Casey for this work and second, what Casey will do when he gets to Las Vegas.

First, why we are commissioning Casey. To help us understand this, I want to read Acts 13:1-3, and in those verses we see how the church at Antioch in Syria commissioned two men named Barnabas and Saul, more famously known as the apostle Paul: “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.”

You can read those verses and take them to mean that the church had a worship service one Sunday and all of the sudden, out of thin air, a prophet got up and spoke with the authority of the Holy Spirit and said, “Set apart Barnabas and Saul for me.” A lot of Bible scholars think it probably was a prophet there in the church (we read about prophets in verse 1) who, inspired by the Holy Spirit, spoke these authoritative words.

That could be what happened, but I don’t think it likely. Elsewhere in the book of Acts when a specific prophecy came from an individual in the church, Luke (the author of Acts) gives his name. So in Acts 11 we read that Agabus predicted a severe famine in the Roman world. In Acts 21 this same Agabus predicted Paul’s arrest.

Since no individual is mentioned, I don’t think the Holy Spirit spoke through one man. Rather, I think he spoke through the entire church at Antioch. Nor do I think it happened all at once, but rather over a period of weeks and months.

The church there had known Saul and Barnabas for three or four years (I’m going to call Saul “Paul” the rest of the way. Saul was his name in Hebrew, but in Greek his name was Paul, and since most of Paul’s ministry was conducted in the Greek world among Greek-speakers, that’s the name most familiar to us). The church had seen Paul and Barnabas’ gifts, especially Paul’s. They knew Paul was anointed by God.

Paul knew it, too. And Paul felt an internal call (you might call it a “sanctified desire”) to take the gospel of Jesus west from Antioch, into Roman provinces where it had never been before.

So Saul came before the church and said, “You’ve seen my gifts. You know what I can do and can’t do. You know my desire. Will you help me be certain that this is from God? And if it is, will you send and support me while I go on this mission that I believe God has called me to do?”

We read that the church was “worshiping the Lord and fasting.” If the fast meant the church had only missed breakfast that morning before worship, that wouldn’t have been worth mentioning. Probably, this process went on for days or weeks leading up to this particular worship service. So the church at Antioch knew Paul and Barnabas for years, they observed their gifts, they prayed, fasted, and worshiped, and it seemed to them sending these two men west would please the Lord. Then the church laid hands on Paul and Barnabas, officially commissioned them for this task, and sent them off.

Something very similar has happened between Grace Bible Church and Casey Russell. Casey has been known to us for several years, and his gifts have been on display in this church. It first became clear to me through how he led his community group. The Casey Russell community group is one of the strongest small groups to have ever come out of this church, and we heard story after story of the fellowship and love within that group. Then Casey had some opportunities to teach in front of the church, and he did well. People were helped. A couple of his talks in particular were outstanding.

Then Casey came to the elders and said, “I’ve heard you guys talk about church planting. I know you want Grace to be the kind of church that starts new churches. My desire is to plant a church, but you guys know me and what I can do and can’t do. Will you help me discern whether or not this is from God? And if it is, will you help me plant a church?” We said, “Absolutely,” because you can’t plant churches without church planters. So Casey has been an assistant pastor at Grace for over a year now, we’ve seen God work through him, and with the help of the North American Mission Board we’ve decided that God is calling him too, like Paul, to go west – this time to Las Vegas.

So please understand that today isn’t some kind of formality. It’s the culmination of a years-long discernment process that we feel like the Holy Spirit has led (just like in Acts 13), and so with joy we commission Casey for this work. That’s why this is happening today.

Second, what Casey will do when he gets to Las Vegas. Now let’s read Acts 16:11-15: “So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. ¹³ And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. ¹⁴ One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵ And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us.”

All the scholars point out that Paul, upon his arrival in Philippi for the purpose of starting his first church on the continent of Europe, did not immediately go door-to-door in the city and share the gospel with the strangers he met and try to start a brand new church from scratch. Typically, when Paul arrived in a new city he went first to the local synagogue, taught from the Hebrew Scriptures, and tried to persuade the local Jews that Jesus was the Messiah.

But apparently there was no synagogue in Philippi. You needed at least ten men to start one, and it reads as if the believers in God in Philippi were all women. So the first thing Paul did in that city was wait until the Sabbath and go to “a place of prayer” near the river outside the city. Before last week I had always imagined Paul and these women meeting literally on the riverbank, but probably someone had a house or a cottage there by the water and that was where all the God-fearers met to study the Scriptures. And there Paul met Lydia, his first convert in Europe (though she was from Asia), and she was the first member of the church at Philippi.

The Las Vegas metro area has a population of over two million people. It’s a big city. Casey is heading to the extreme northwest part of the Las Vegas area known as Lone Mountain. Lone Mountain is so new that it basically did not exist when the 2010 census was taken – it was just desert plain – but now eight years later has a population of 50,000 people. A hundred people move there every week. Because the area is so new, the Christian witness there is way behind. There may be five or six churches – one for every ten thousand people – but even of those five or six we’re not sure they’re faithful to the Bible.

When Casey arrives in Las Vegas, he, like Paul, will not parachute into a new city and try and start a new church from scratch. We have, along with the help of the North American Mission Board, identified “a place of prayer.” He will intern with an existing church about ten miles from Lone Mountain for a year or two, get to know the culture, and with the help of those believers already on the ground in Las Vegas begin the work of starting a new church in Las Vegas. And our prayer that there will be dozens and hundreds of Lydias that will result.

Why did I walk through Acts 13 and 16 like this? I want you see what this process looks like at Grace – how we send men out to do this kind of work. I also wanted to show you that what Casey is doing and what we at Grace Bible have been and will be doing through him is the biblical model for taking the gospel to all peoples. This is how it is done. We send people out in wise, biblical ways to start churches – that’s the way the gospel spreads. As Tim Keller says, “Only a person who is being ‘evangelized’ in the context of an on-going worshipping and shepherding community can be sure of finally coming home into vital, saving faith.” And he quotes one missiologist who said, “Planting new churches is the most effective evangelistic methodology known under heaven.”

I also walked through Acts 13 and 16 this morning because I want to show you why you should be a part of this new work. Why you should pray, why you should give, and why, when the time comes, you should go to Lone Mountain and help Casey knock on doors and host Backyard Bible Clubs and neighborhood cookouts. Jesus said, “¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Matthew 28:19-20a. That is a

command that is given to all Christians. Through commissioning Casey Russell, here's a great chance for you to obey that command. PRAY