

"THE GENTILE MISSION BEGINS"

This passage marks an important turning point in the book of Acts. Up to this point, Luke has given us a few glimpses of the gospel going beyond ethnic Israelites to the Gentiles, but in these verses we have the first instance of the gospel being intentionally brought beyond Palestine and Syria to those who are far off. This is the beginning of what is often referred to as Paul's first missionary journey. And one of the things that stands out in these verses is that there is a very clear emphasis upon the role that the Holy Spirit played in all of this. It was the Spirit who told the church at Antioch to set apart Paul and Barnabas for their mission. It was the Spirit who sent them on their way. It was the Spirit who empowered Paul to rebuke the false prophet who was trying to prevent the proconsul from placing his faith in Christ. The overall point is quite clear: *it was the Holy Spirit who sent and empowered Paul and his co-workers for the mission of bringing the gospel to the Gentile world.* And the contemporary significance of this is the fact that the same Spirit empowers the church's ministry today.

The Spirit Sets Paul and Barnabas Apart for the Gentile Mission

At the end of chapter 12, Luke mentioned that Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch from their relief trip to Jerusalem, bringing Mark along with them. This

is the same Mark whose mother's house served as a meeting place for many of the Christians in Jerusalem, the same Mark who would later write the Gospel that is known by his name. And as we will see over the next few chapters, he was the man who played the central role in bringing Paul and Barnabas' missionary partnership to an end.

As chapter 1 begins, Luke tells us the names of five men who served as prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch: Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen, and Saul (or Paul). One of the things that stands out about this list is the fact that these men were of such diverse backgrounds. Barnabas was Jew from the island of Cyprus. Simeon was probably from North Africa. Lucius was from Libya. Manaen grew up among the cultural elites, as a childhood friend of Herod Antipas, the Herod who killed John the Baptist and mocked Jesus on the night of his arrest and trial. (By the way, if you have a more recent edition of the ESV, you will see that they have altered the translation regarding Luke's description of Manaen. While the earlier version, from which I am reading, says that Manaen was "a member of the court of Herod," the updated version says that Manaen was "a lifelong friend of Herod." The newer translation is definitely a better representation of the original Greek. Luke is telling us that Manaen grew up as a close friend of the man who would murder John the

Baptist and mock Jesus. What an example of the mystery of God's grace!) The last name on Luke's list is Saul, a converted Pharisee who hailed from Tarsus. The Antioch church's teachers and prophets hailed from diverse regions and had diverse backgrounds. It would seem that this had something to do with Antioch becoming the sending base for the mission to the Gentiles.

There are several things that stand out as we look at Luke's description of the setting apart of Paul and Barnabas in the first three verses of this chapter. First of all, these verses show us that worship leads to mission. The church was worshipping God when the Spirit spoke, presumably through one of the men who had the gift of prophecy, and told them to set apart Barnabas and Paul for the work to which God called them. It is true that the gift of prophecy is no longer in operation in the post-apostolic church, but the Spirit of God still speaks to us through the preaching of the Word. And one of his purposes in doing so is to continue to guide the church as we go about our mission of making disciples of all nations. Worship leads to missions.

Another thing that is worth noting here is that the message that the Spirit gave these Christians was not very specific. He told them to "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." What work? Where was this work to be carried out? Based upon what Luke tells us here, the

Spirit did not answer those questions. This reminds me of the voice that Kevin Costner's character hears out in his corn field in the movie *Field of Dreams*: "If you build it, he will come." Build what? Who will come? The voice didn't say. Well, it seems as though something similar happened at that worship service in Antioch. The Spirit certainly could have given detailed instructions through a direct word of prophecy, but he apparently used more ordinary means to guide Barnabas and Saul regarding the specifics of what he was calling them to do. Even though their mission began with a prophetic message, they still had to exercise wisdom and walk by faith.

Another thing that stands out in these opening verses is that the disciples at Antioch were fasting when this took place. Fasting is not mentioned a lot in the New Testament, but it is mentioned enough to suggest that it was one aspect of discipleship and church life in the first-century church. Jesus certainly expected that his followers would fast, as we can see by the fact that his instructions about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount begin with the words, "And when you fast..." (Mt. 6:16) In spite of this, fasting does not seem to be a part of most Christians' lives today. I am not entirely sure why this is the case. Perhaps it is because we are afraid of slipping into a works-oriented mindset, which is certainly a valid concern. Perhaps we don't fast because we have been

influenced by our culture's aversion to any form of self-denial. Or perhaps we don't fast because we simply do not see the point of it.

I am not going to say all that there is to say about fasting in this sermon, but I do want to point out a couple of the things that this passage can teach us about this practice. The first thing to note is that fasting is not an end in itself. In the Bible, fasting is almost always paired with prayer and worship, which is exactly what we see in this passage. As John Stott notes, "[fasting] is a negative action...for a positive one." [217] Fasting is given as a help for prayer. It helps us express our earnestness in prayer. It lends a note of urgency to our prayers. It reminds us that we need the Lord more than we need food.

The Bible gives us examples of both private fasting and communal fasting. This passage clearly belongs to the latter category. And it seems that the reason why these Christians were fasting was because they were seeking the Lord's guidance as they reflected on the mission that Jesus gave his church before he ascended into heaven. Up to this point in Acts, the Lord used persecution to scatter his people throughout Palestine so that the gospel could be spread beyond Jerusalem and Judea. But the leaders of the church in Antioch called for a time of fasting and prayer in order to seek the Lord's direction regarding how they should proceed with the mission of making disciples of all nations. There

are other reasons to fast, but one of them is to seek guidance from the Lord. In the words of John Calvin, “Whenever men are to pray to God concerning any great matter, it would be expedient to appoint fasting along with prayer... For since this is a holy exercise both for the humbling of men and for their confession of humility, why should we use it any less than the ancients did in similar need?” [*Institutes*, 4.12.17] A church might want to practice communal fasting and prayer when church officers are about to be elected, or when church plants are being considered, or when missionaries are being sent out. Fasting helps us to take the matters that we are praying about more seriously. It is a way of telling the Lord that we are in earnest and that we recognize our complete dependence upon him. This is true of fasting in general. And because of this, it would be a good thing for us to look for ways to make fasting more of a part of our life of discipleship, both privately and corporately.

The Spirit Empowers Paul and Barnabas’ Ministry among the Gentiles

After telling us about how Paul and Barnabas were commissioned for their missionary work, Luke then says that they took Mark with them and sailed to the island of Cyprus. After preaching in the synagogues at one end of the island, they traveled across to the other end, to the city of Paphos, where the Roman

proconsul, a man named Sergius Paulus, lived. The proconsul was very interested in hearing Paul and Barnabas' preaching, but he was accompanied by a false prophet named Bar-Jesus who tried to prevent him from turning to the Christian faith. It is not very hard for us to see why Bar-Jesus, or Elymas, would not want the proconsul to convert to Christianity. If Sergius converted to Christianity, he would be told that sorcery was incompatible with his new faith. Elymas realized that the proconsul's conversion would result in him losing his position of influence on the island.

There are still Elymases in the world today. There are plenty of false teachers and false prophets, men and women who have a vested interest in making sure that people do not turn to Christ in faith. Some of them can be found inside churches that still identify themselves as Christian. Some of them are a part of cults. And some of them are purely secular. Regardless of where they come from, they all have the same basic goal: they want to turn people away from the true faith.

It is at this point, right after telling us about Elymas' attempt to prevent the proconsul from turning to Christ, that Luke stops using the Jewish name Saul and begins using the Roman name Paul to refer to the apostle to the Gentiles. Perhaps Luke does this because he regards Paul's ministry to the Gentiles as

having its beginning with the Spirit-inspired rebuke that he issued against Elymas, a Jew who was trying to turn a Gentile away from the Christian faith.

There are several things worth noting about Paul's rebuke of Elymas. First of all, we need to remember that the things that Paul says to him were spoken as he was filled with the Holy Spirit. This tells us that his words had prophetic authority, which was demonstrated by the fact that those words resulted in Elymas being made temporarily blind. Now it is true, as I have been saying throughout this sermon series in Acts, that the gift of prophecy was something that ended after the foundation-laying era of the apostles' ministry. We do not have access to the gift of prophecy today. That being said, we do have access to the Spirit-inspired Scriptures. And because of this, we too can speak authoritatively against false teachers.

Another thing to note about Paul's response to Elymas is that he was not afraid to speak the truth about error. Listen again to Paul's words in verse 10: "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?" That is pretty harsh, isn't it? Of course, we have to remember that Paul was speaking under the direct influence of the Holy Spirit, which is something that no longer takes place today. We do need to be careful that we not respond to falsehood in a

manner that is itself fleshly. Calvin makes this point in his comments on this passage, noting that we should not “favour the affections of the flesh too much under the colour of zeal,” nor should we “break out with headlong and unseasonable heat when there is yet place for moderation,” nor should we “give [ourselves] over to foolish and uncomely railing.” The Lord does not want us to respond to falsehood in an unrestrained or sinful manner. But he does want us to expose it for what it is. We need to speak the truth about error, even though we are living in a relativistic age that sees such claims as arrogant and implausible.

After rebuking Elymas, Paul cursed him, telling him that he would be blind and unable to see the sun for a time. You will remember that this was the very thing that happened to Paul after his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. He was without sight for three days. In both of these instances, men who displayed their spiritual blindness by opposing Christ were given over to physical blindness as a consequence of what they had done.

The passage ends by telling us of Sergius’ conversion. “Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.” It is interesting that even though Sergius saw what happened to Elymas, that was not the thing that astonished him. The thing that astonished

him was the teaching of the Lord. The gospel astonished him. This is something from which we can take a great deal of encouragement. We do not have the ability to strike the opponents of the gospel blind, but we have been entrusted with the same gospel that brought this pagan proconsul to saving faith in Christ. The gospel is still astonishing people today. The Lord is still using it to bring lost people into his kingdom. May he continue to work through this church's ministry, and through the witness of its members, to do so.