

H. Paul's First Missionary Journey (13:1-14:28)

Chapter eleven ended with Paul and Barnabas traveling from Antioch to Jerusalem with an offering for the struggling Church there. Luke said nothing more about that endeavor, turning his attention immediately to Herod's confrontation with the Church and the Lord's intervention and deliverance, first in Peter's liberation from prison and then in Herod's death at Caesarea. But following that account, Luke reengaged his narrative where he left off, namely with Paul and Barnabas' return to Antioch (12:25). With them was John Mark, and this turn of events set the stage for the next major development in the progress of Christ's kingdom. In obedience to the Spirit's call and commission, Paul and Barnabas, together with John Mark, were soon to depart Antioch on a missionary journey that would take them through much of Asia Minor. The formal Gentile mission – hinted at in Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian, prepared for in Saul's conversion and divinely affirmed and clarified in Cornelius' house – was now about to begin; the gospel of forgiveness, renewal and reconciliation was going to go to the ends of the earth.

1. Luke introduced this context by mentioning the leadership in the Antioch church. Specifically, he named five prophets and teachers, among whom were Saul and Barnabas (13:1-2). He provided no further clarification, such as which of the five held which office or whether they all were prophets and teachers. Neither did he define or distinguish between the two offices or explain how the prophets and teachers functioned in the church. It seems that his intention was simply to show that there were men in the Antioch congregation who were suited to hearing and conveying the Spirit's instruction.

Luke's account also doesn't specify how these men discerned the Spirit's leading, but he implies that it came at a time when they were immersed in worship and fasting. (Some believe that Luke was referring to the whole church in v. 2, but the previous verse suggests otherwise.) As well, Luke gave no indication that these leaders were seeking the Spirit's direction regarding Paul and Barnabas; the Spirit simply took advantage of that occasion to communicate to them His purposes for these two men.

The fact that the Spirit impressed the same leading upon five individuals reinforced to them that they were indeed hearing His voice and not their own. (It would have been easy to discount this impression had it only come to Saul and Barnabas, the two individuals who were the object of the Spirit's instruction.) Even so, they didn't respond right away. Most likely they communicated the Spirit's word to the rest of the church so that they could all spend some time in prayer and fasting, seeking the Lord's affirmation and blessing upon what they believed they were being directed to do. Only after that season of preparation did they lay hands on Paul and Barnabas and send them out (13:3). The church body dispatched them, but not on their own initiative; it was the Spirit who was sending them into the world (cf. v. 3 with vv. 2 and 4).

Though in a sense unique to the Antioch church, this situation was paradigmatic. That is, it provides some important principles for the larger Church's understanding and practice:

- First, being composed of human beings, the decisions and actions of a given church are necessarily the decisions and actions of men.

- But to be legitimate, all such undertakings must be directed by the Spirit; anything less is of men and not God. In the end, the saints must decide and act, but they must do so with the valid conviction that they are responding to the Spirit's leading.
- And the single greatest indication of that leading is the body's unanimity. All believers are indwelt by the Spirit, and He is at work in each of them to renew their minds and give them the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:12-16). This being so, it follows that the Spirit's leading will manifest itself broadly – if not uniformly – in a body of believers. But this is not to say that unanimity *in itself* indicates the will of the Spirit; all sorts of forces can effect uniform agreement, including intimidation and coercion. The unanimity that testifies to the Spirit's leading is that which results from the individual members of the believing community purposefully and patiently seeking to discern that leading through prayer and meditation.

2. Luke is also silent about any specific direction the Spirit gave concerning where exactly Paul and Barnabas were to go, but his account seems to suggest that they left Antioch with a purposeful itinerary (13:4ff). They also determined to take John Mark with them, being convinced that he could assist them in their mission. (Paul and Barnabas had obviously seen something in him that moved them to bring him with them to Antioch, and that long journey from Jerusalem would have given them ample time to gain even more confidence in his faith and calling.)

- a. Again, Antioch is a port city on the Orontes River, and the men's journey took them downriver to Seleucia on the coast and then west into the Mediterranean to the island of Cyprus (Barnabas' birthplace). They landed at Cyprus at the eastern seaport city of Salamis and immediately began preaching the gospel in the synagogues there (13:4-5). This deserves some comment in light of the fact that this first missionary journey initiated the "ends of the earth" Gentile mission.

First of all, Paul's entire ministry was characterized by this "Jew first" orientation. His common practice throughout his travels was to first enter the synagogues and testify to his Jewish brethren of the Lord Jesus (ref. 13:14, 14:1, 44-46, 17:1-3, 10-11, 16-17, 18:1-4, 7-8, 18-19, 19:1-8, etc.). This orientation reflected Paul's passionate burden for his countrymen (Romans 9:1-5), but, more than that, it resulted from his overall salvation-historical perspective. Paul understood the primacy of the sons of Israel in God's redemptive purpose and accomplishment:

- Theirs were the patriarchs, the covenants, the promises, the oracles of God and even the Christ according to the flesh, so that Jesus could justly declare that "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22; cf. Romans 3:1-2).
- Beyond that, Paul recognized God's intention to use Israel's unbelief and opposition to bring His gospel and its life to the Gentiles (Romans 9-11). He took the gospel first to the Jews because of their privilege, but also for the sake of the Gentiles' salvation. Not ethnicity or national pride, but fidelity to God's purpose drove the orientation of Paul's gospel ministry.

- b. The three men made their way across Cyprus, coming eventually to Paphos on the west coast of the island. There they encountered a sorcerer named Bar-Jesus (ironically, his name means “son of salvation” in Aramaic). Luke described this man as a Jewish false prophet who apparently served as the personal seer of the Roman proconsul of that region (13:6-7). When this official summoned Paul and Barnabas to hear what they were proclaiming, Bar-Jesus (Elymas) was present and immediately set about trying to dissuade him from the faith (13:8).
- c. Luke doesn’t say what provoked Elymas’ opposition, but it certainly wasn’t convictions arising from his Jewish faith. For this man was a practitioner of magical arts, and therefore an apostate from Judaism; his Jewish brethren would have found fault with him as much as with Paul and Barnabas and the gospel they were proclaiming. The context suggests that Elymas saw in these men and their message a threat to his own well-being. He enjoyed a position of power and influence as Sergius Paulus’ seer, and he realized that he would lose that standing if his master came to faith in Jesus (cf. 16:16-19). Paul discerned what Elymas was trying to do and confronted him in his sin. That confrontation is the vehicle for understanding this individual and his contribution to Luke’s narrative.

Paul challenged Elymas, but as God’s prophet filled with the Spirit (13:9). In that connection, Luke here introduced the name *Paul*, never again to refer to him as Saul. Jesus Himself had commissioned Paul (9:15), His Spirit initiated that commission (13:2), and He was now empowering it; the transformation from Pharisee to apostle was complete. Paul’s words to Sergius Paulus had been *God’s* words (v. 7), but so were those he directed to Bar-Jesus. The former were the words of life to be realized in Jesus Christ; the latter were words of condemnation for opposing Him. That condemnation – the Spirit’s condemnation – took the form of a series of indictments followed by the divine sentence they had incurred.

- The heart of the Spirit’s indictment was that Bar-Jesus, the “son of salvation,” was really “*a son of the devil.*” Like his infernal father, he was marked by deceitfulness, villainy and opposition to God’s righteousness.
- Moreover, Elymas’ opposition consisted of attempting to “*make crooked the straight ways of the Lord.*” (13:10). True to his status as a false prophet (v. 6), Elymas was employing deceit – lying words – to contradict and oppose the true words Paul and Barnabas were proclaiming. His goal was to pervert and obscure their gospel and so direct his master away from Christ. This action clarifies Paul’s charge that Elymas was an “enemy of all righteousness”: His enmity didn’t reside in his pagan religion as such; this was merely a symptom of the problem. Neither was Paul accusing him of promoting an immoral or unethical lifestyle. *Elymas was an enemy of all righteousness because he was an enemy of Christ’s gospel*; he opposed the righteousness God revealed and accomplished in His Son and which Paul and Barnabas were proclaiming. This is the true mark of those who are children of the devil (cf. John 8:31-45; Romans 3:21-26).

- Paul issued the Spirit's indictment and then pronounced His sentence: Elymas was to be rendered blind for a season (13:11). How painful these words must have been for Paul, for they surely took his mind back to the day on the Damascus road when Jesus had imposed the same sentence on him. He, too, had been left groping about for men to lead him by the hand.

Elymas was an apostate Jew seduced away from God by the promise of occult power; Paul had been the quintessential Jew, utterly consecrated to God and His service. These two men couldn't have been more different, and yet the divine Judge had justly sentenced both men to the same fate. For all their differences, both were equally blind apart from the life of Christ; both were enemies of His cross, men whose god was their appetite and whose glory was in their shame.

What the Spirit directed Paul to pronounce upon Elymas served as a powerful reminder of the grace Christ had given to him. For all his knowledge, zeal and devotion, Paul had been just as blind as this pathetic sorcerer; his unbelief had made him as much of an apostate as the man standing before him.

- d. By a single act the Spirit had silenced Elymas' opposition and strengthened Paul's faith and resolve. The outcome was the salvation of Sergius Paulus. Luke noted that he believed when he saw what happened to his magician, but that supernatural event didn't itself bring about his conversion. Paul's gospel (what Luke called "the teaching of the Lord"), not the mere demonstration of divine power, provoked Sergius' astonishment and led to his faith in Jesus (13:12).

Thus Luke recorded as the first convert of Paul's formal mission a man who was a Gentile *indeed*. Unlike Cornelius and the Ethiopian, this Roman proconsul had no prior connection with Judaism or the God of Israel. In every way, he had lived as a man "*separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, a stranger to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.*"

In this way Luke emphasized the profound truth that a new and everlasting age had dawned upon God's creation; the word of the Lord was being fulfilled. The former order of things has passed away, yielding to the new creation in Christ. In the "age that was," the world had groped in the darkness of alienation and fear, entirely subjugated to the lordship of the "god of this world." The Creator-God had let the nations go their own way, confining His self-revelation to the covenant house of Israel and those who joined themselves to that chosen nation. God was the God of Israel, but now that distinction had been fulfilled in Christ, the True Israel and Seed of Abraham. In Him God was realizing His promise to bring His blessing to all the families of the earth. Union with Israel was still the issue, but the "Israel" in whom Israel has found its own destiny and fulfillment.

But union with a new Lord means liberation from the former one; no man can serve two masters. Luke understood that the salvation of the Gentiles implies Christ's triumph over the one who held them captive, and thus he set the Spirit's triumphal conquest of Sergius Paulus against the backdrop of His victory over Elymas and the "god" he served.