

Lesson 19: Acts 12:25-13:12 The Holy Spirit Initiates Gospel Mission to Gentiles

Introduction

Intentional Gospel Mission to Gentiles Begins	
12:25-14:28 The Preaching of the Good News of Salvation	15:1-16:4 The Discussions of the Terms of Salvation
12:25-13:12 Antioch to Paphos	15:1-5 Antioch to Jerusalem
13:13-52 Pisidian Antioch	15:6-21 The Jerusalem Council
14:1-20 Iconium to Derbe	15:22-35 The Letter
14:21-28 Return to Strengthen the Churches	15:36-16:4 Return to Strengthen the Churches
16:5 So the churches were being strengthened in the faith and were increasing in number daily.	

David Gooding, *True to Faith*.¹

Introduction to the Acts of Paul

We enter into new territory in Acts chapter 13. Intentional Gospel mission to Gentiles begins here. We are also in chapter 13 transitioning to the acts of Paul. Remember the Acts of the Apostles is framed around the acts of two Apostles. It's not the story of all 12. The first half of Acts emphasizes the ministry of Peter. The second half of Acts focuses on the work of Paul. Through the whole, we recognize the more essential acts of Jesus Christ and acts of the Holy Spirit to bring about the spread of the Gospel through true, saving faith among Jews and Gentiles beginning in Jerusalem and radiating outward; outward geographically and outward ethnically.

Acts 13 gives us our first report of a church intentionally initiating a missionary outreach to Gentiles. Though we have already seen new birth among Gentiles by Christian Jews moved by the Holy Spirit to freely offer the gift of salvation across barriers of ethnicity and nationality. The Gospel has gone to the Samaritans, the Ethiopian Eunuch, and the Roman Centurion's household. We even have a church planted already in Antioch, the third largest city of the Roman Empire, made up of Jews and Gentiles.

We expect that other Jews have returned home after the Jerusalem awakening across the Roman Empire and Parthia, sharing the Good News certainly with other Jews and even some crossing the missions barrier to share with Gentiles. We expect that some of the Apostles may have already begun missions work, knowing that many of them will die as missionaries in non-Jewish territories. So, we are not saying that Acts 13 marks a radical, new shift in the early Church's vision of who gets to receive the Good News. On the day of the birth of the Church, described in Acts 2, with Jews gathered from North Africa to Rome through Asia Minor to Mesopotamia, the vision of the Gospel going out to all peoples was integral to God's plan for the Church from day one. The Gospel has already begun the move from Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria out to the remote places of the Earth.

At the same time, what happens here in Acts 13 is unique and extremely important. God chose to use one man more than any other man to communicate to us the theology of the New Covenant. And that man would be a missionary. He would not be a pure intellectual doing all his work from a

¹ David Gooding. *True to Faith*. (Coleraine, N Ireland: Myrtlefield House, 1990) 244.

library. He would be a theologian, and an evangelist, and a church planter. And he would not be a church planter among his own ethnic group or in his own nation. He would be a missionary church planter. His theology will be worked out intellectually and practically as evangelist, pastor, and missionary, as a preacher, an organizer, a strategist, a disciple-maker and a shepherd.

That man was a legalistic Jew of Jews, proudly tracing his lineage to the tribe of Benjamin, trained under the esteemed rabbi Gamaliel, a Pharisee committed to living out the Law, intense, dogmatic, and zealous. And ironically, this man is the man who would understand and communicate and fight for the radical new wineskin of the New Covenant that included Gentiles by grace through faith, without obedience to the Old Testament markers of the Law. He is the man who will remind the Galatians “for freedom Christ Jesus set us free”, who will explain to the Ephesians it is “by grace you have been saved”, who will declare to the Philippians “to live is Christ; to die is gain”, who will proclaim to the Colossians that “Christ is all in all” and will joyful exclaim to the Romans “I am not ashamed of the Gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes!”

This Pharisee of Pharisees received from God a vision of discontinuity from the Old. He was able to move to something truly new. And, at the same time, he will always insist upon continuity from Old to New. He is not going to try to recreate the Old in the New. It’s something new. And he will not allow a rejection of the Old to make way for the New. He will continue to insist that the Law is “holy and righteous and good.” He repeats that Jesus Christ is fulfillment of Law and Prophets. He grounds his teaching in quotation after quotation of the Old Testament. He saw fulfillment, and he saw new things realized. He could distinguish the shadow of ritual from the reality in Jesus.

Not only did God open his eyes to New Covenant theology. God also opened his eyes to New Covenant practice. He calls us to the “newness of the Spirit” in contrast to the “oldness of the letter.” The New Covenant is not a relaxation of righteousness as some wrongly think. It is not a new form of legalism that others have contrived. Paul follows Christ’s teaching in the sermon on the mount by exhorting us to a vision of righteousness in the New Covenant that surpasses the requirements of the Old Covenant. He calls us to be “conformed to the image of the Son”, to “walk in the good works God has prepared for us”, “to offer our bodies a living sacrifice.” He gives us God’s vision of a grace-based righteousness rooted and growing out of a new heart and the internal reality of Christ in us.

For some reason, God did not choose one of the Twelve as the primary communicator of this New Covenant vision. Matthew and John and Peter all write inspired Scripture, guided by the Holy Spirit. And yet, this apostle born late, is the one God chose through whom to deliver the greater portion of the New Covenant teaching to the churches. He was a humbled man, a persecutor who was rebuked, lowered, blinded, redeemed, deeply knowledgeable in his intellectual training of the Old Testament, transformed through his encounter with Jesus Christ, and practically formed in his years of missionary evangelism and church planting.

This moment in Acts 13 is an important moment both in the expansion of the Gospel out to Gentile peoples, and also in creating the context out of which God will produce through Paul the New Covenant letters of Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. These letters will be invaluable for transforming our minds and guiding our behavior as the New Covenant people of God. And it all begins here. This is an important moment.

Luke has already given us Paul’s beginning, using that overlapping style that he loves. And before we get to the acts of Paul, we’ve got the back story of Paul already. We’ve got his conversion while we were still focused on Peter. Luke described his animosity towards Christians and his radical conversion experience. More than that, Luke has also described what we could call Paul’s first

missionary journey, which took place around Damascus in Arabia right after his conversion. Then Paul went to Jerusalem and taught there. He likely conducted a second missionary journey in and around Tarsus. Luke told us about his coming to Antioch through the effort of Barnabas and a second trip to Jerusalem with famine support and probably meeting with other Christian leaders. And this is all the back story. We are not surprised at the development of Paul's missionary vision, nor are we surprised by his theological understanding and practical ministry skill. He is not a new believer here in Antioch when he is called forth. This is a man prepared by the Potter's hands for this moment.

The last verse of chapter 12 is unfortunately cut off from chapter 13 in our Bibles. It would have been more in line with Luke's organization to end chapter 12 with the summary statement of verse 24 that completes the third part of Acts, "But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied." Acts 12:25 would have been better numbered as the first verse of then next chapter. "And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with *them* John, who was also called Mark." We can understand why this verse is often seen as the end of the third part. It is a transitional verse continuing the interlocking style we have seen with Luke use at the transition of every major part of Acts. Luke provides a summary verse reporting the growth of the Church, and he overlaps the ending content of the previous part with the beginning content of the next part.

Acts 12:25 does look back to the fact that Barnabas and Saul had gone from Antioch to Jerusalem with a gift for the church. And it looks forward to the missionary journey that is about to begin. The reference to Mark also looks back to Peter's arrival after his arrest to Mark's mother's house and forward to Mark's initial participation on the missionary journey soon to set out.

But we did not get any information in Acts 12 about Paul and Barnabas' stay in Jerusalem. That's not what this story is about. The story was about Peter. So, this reference is not a summary of chapter 12. The purpose of the reference is to redirect our attention from Peter to the report Luke is getting ready to tell us about Paul and Barnabas.

We are ready now to transition from the first half of Acts, which gave focus to the ministry of Peter and growth of the Church primarily in Israel, to the second half of Acts, which gives focus to the ministry of Paul and the missionary spread of the Gospel out among Gentiles. Luke signals to us this major transition in an interesting way with a small detail that is kind of like a blinking light. It's small, but it's clear. In Acts 13:9 when he comments "But Saul, who was also known as Paul..." I have been calling Paul, "Paul" through the first half of Acts, so this might not strike you as strongly that we haven't used that name yet. Luke has not called him, Paul, once before 13:9 and he is not going to refer to him as Saul after 13:9, except when Paul is quoting his own conversion story. He will call himself, Saul. The way Luke is using Saul's name - Paul's name - signals to us a transition from the primarily Jewish focus of the first half of Acts to a primarily Gentile focus of the second half of Acts.

In Paul's day, Jews interacting with Gentiles commonly chose a second Greek name to go by. If you have any friends from China, you are familiar with the idea, since Chinese people often choose an English name to use in English speaking contexts. So, Jews of the day did the same thing. They have their Jewish, their Hebrew name, and then they choose a Greek name that would sound better in Greek context. Paul is not a new name given him by Jesus, like with Peter. Peter's Hebrew name was Simon. Jesus did not give Simon the new name, Peter. Jesus gave Simon the new Hebrew name, Cephas. "And Simon, you will now be called, Cephas," which means, "rock". Peter, then, is the Greek name that also means, "rock." Luke wrote Acts in Greek. And so, he used the Greek name "Peter" for Peter throughout. He did not change names for Peter like he does for Paul. That's another thing that makes the shift from Saul to Paul even more apparent. He only does this with Paul. And so, it becomes obvious to us that this change from Saul to Paul in Acts is coinciding with the shift in Luke's reporting, which is now going to begin to emphasize Gentile ministry. Saul is now going to the Greek speaking Gentiles. And so he will from now on be identified as Paul. This is the name we know him of because he has become so identified as the Apostle to the Gentiles, we don't know him by his Hebrew name. We know him by his Greek name, the name he used on his missionary journeys.

Introduction to Acts Part IV

So, we have a transition from the first half of Acts to the second half of Acts. The first half contained three major parts, which all ended with a summary statement. The second half is going to contain three major parts, which are all going to end with a summary statement. So that means we are not only starting the second half of Acts here in chapter 13. We are also starting the first part of the second half of Acts, which is the fourth part of the book of Acts. And I am just about ready to get us into the text. But before we do, let's consider very briefly the structure of this fourth part of Acts which I have titled, "Intentional Gospel Mission to Gentiles Begins." So that's our title for this fourth part - "Intentional Gospel Mission to Gentiles Begins."

And this fourth part of Acts can be divided into two major movements. David Gooding titles the first, "The Preaching of the Good News of Salvation." And this movement covers what we traditionally call "the first missionary journey of Paul." That's where we're going to get the preaching of the Good News of salvation. Gooding titles the second movement, "The Discussions of the Terms of Salvation." And central to that movement is the Council of Jerusalem, where the application of Jewish law to Gentile believers will be discussed. So that's why we're calling that, "The Discussions of the Terms of Salvation." Each movement contains four sections. In the first movement, "Preaching of the Good News of Salvation," we begin with section one, "Antioch to Paphos," then move in section two to "Pisidian Antioch," then in section three we cover "Iconium to Derbe," and finish in section four with the "Return to Strengthen the Churches". Then in our second movement, "The Discussions of the Terms of Salvation," which also has four sections, we begin with section one, "Antioch to Jerusalem," then we move in section two to the "Jerusalem Council", then in section three we're going to cover the "Council's Letter," and we'll finish section four with another "Return to Strengthen the Churches". So, these two movements kind of line up with four sections each that are, in a sense, parallel to each other.

All right! Now we're ready for our text in this lesson. We begin Acts part IV with section one, "Antioch to Paphos," with a report that includes both the commissioning of Barnabas and Paul, and a spiritual power encounter. The Holy Spirit is prominent in both halves of this section. I'll address these two halves separately. We start with the commissioning in Acts 13:1-3.

The Commissioning of Barnabas and Paul (Acts 13:1-3)

- ¹ Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was *there*, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² While they were ministering to 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, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

The Assembly of Antioch

Let's consider from these three verses how intentional Gospel mission to Gentiles began. In Antioch there is a church. We have recognized that the more literal translation for the word, "church," is, "assembly," from the Greek, "ekklesia". The most important point from the translation is to recognize that the word, "church," in Acts never refers to a building but always to a gathering of people, a gathering of believers.

I have heard preachers point out that in "ekklesia," "kaleo" means, "to call," and the prefix, "ek," means, "out," so "ekklesia" is "called out of". And that's fun, it preaches, but it's not very scholarly. You cannot accurately determine a word's meaning by breaking down the parts of a word. That works sometimes, but only sometimes. For example, if you break down the word, "butterfly," into its component parts you get, "butter," and, "fly." Imagine that image for a moment. You could never get from the word, "butter," and the word, "fly," to the true meaning of the word, "butterfly." Maybe you could if it was, "flutterby." That would make a lot more sense. We could go with "flutter" and "by." So, before we say that "ekklesia" means, "called out ones," or, "called out of," we have to show that Greek speakers thought of that meaning when they used the word. Or at least that Christians

attached this new meaning to the word. And I am not aware, I haven't seen any writings or studies where that meaning emphasized, either in secular Greek usage, or by early Christians. It is not a bad meaning to apply to the people of God. We are the called-out ones. We are called out of the Kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of light. There is just no proof that I am aware of that easily Christians thought of that meaning when they used the word, "ekklesia."

The word had a simple use in Greek. It simply meant, "an assembly of people." The town clerk of Ephesus uses the word in Acts 19:39 to refer to the mob of people that had gathered in the city's theater. There they are an unlawful *ekklesia*, or unlawful assembly. The word did have a more technical sense that could have been meaningful to early Christians who might have thought of it this way.

In the Greek democracies, the gathering of legal voters, free, landowning male citizens were the *ekklesia*, the city assembly. Antioch is not a Greek democracy, but reference to the assembly of Antioch could bring to mind, for a Greek speaker, the idea of a city assembly. That idea may lay in the background for Hellenized Gentiles when they hear the phrase, "church of Ephesus," you know, "assembly of Ephesus," or, "assembly of Corinth," the "church of Corinth". Like there is an assembly in the political sphere, there is a more important assembly in the spiritual realm, that is concerned with the spiritual growth, and benefit, and blessing of the city. The church is the assembly of believers in Jesus Christ that cares about the city. We belong to that assembly, the assembly of the Kingdom of Heaven in Antioch, or in Zagreb, or in Winston-Salem, or in Chisinau. The word brings to mind our identity as citizens of a spiritual kingdom. And so, the word also brings to mind our unity with all the other true believers in our city. Each local gathering of believers, whether a church of 5000 or a church of 15, is part of the assembly of that city. Or more accurately, we should say that the born-again believers in each local church who have truly placed their faith in Jesus are members of the assembly of Jesus Christ in that town. And unlike the Greek democratic assemblies of free, landowning, males, the Church of Jesus Christ, from the very beginning, was made up of male and female, rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile. There is not a white, Latino, black division in the assembly that is the Church. There is no division based on political party. If you are in Christ, you are in Christ, and you are in His assembly.

So, when you place your faith in Christ, like it or not, you enter into a universal assembly, a universal church of all who truly believe in Jesus Christ. Also, like it or not, you are automatically part of the assembly of believers in a given town or city. The church, the assembly of that place. That is a spiritual reality. You don't get to choose that. When you enter into Christ, you enter into His body, into His assembly, His Kingdom. And you are also called to become a member of a local expression of the Church. And you do have choice about that, whether you will be obedient to participate in a local assembly.

When Luke talks about the church in Antioch or the church of Corinth, he envisions both the gathering of all believers in a city, so everybody in the city who is truly a believer, and the local expressions of that church, which in his day were various house church gatherings. And all these house churches made up the church of Rome, or the church of Antioch, or the church of Ephesus.

The Leaders of the Assembly

Now, in this church early believers understood that leadership was basic to their organization. Luke has already referred to elders giving leadership to the church of Jerusalem. On his missionary journeys, Paul will appoint elders for churches that are planted in various towns and cities. The word, "elder," is not used here in these three verses, though we might imagine that that is who these men are. Instead of referring to them by a title, Luke refers to them by ministry role. And I think it's right to assume that elders are active in ministry. They are people who are doing ministry, but they are people who also are gifted for ministry by the Holy Spirit. And here, they are prophets and teachers of the assembly in Antioch.

The text could mean that some of these men are prophets and some are teachers. Both are spiritual gifts. The commentators I have read think the text leans towards indicating that all of these men as both prophets and teachers. The distinction is not really clear cut. Let's think first about prophets. Old Covenant prophets are not primarily tellers of the future. Though that does happen. And we saw it happen in Acts 11:28 with Agabus foretelling a famine. Even so, prophets are primarily those who call people to Covenant obedience, exhorting the people of God with the blessings that come from obedience and the curses that come from rebellion. So, we're calling people to the Covenant in Scripture and to obey, and to see in the future what's going to happen if people follow God's Word, or if people rebel and walk away from God's Word. This is how I think about it in my mind. I think about prophets as those who apply the Word of God to the people of God in their current circumstances. I believe that prophets are very aware of how the current social and political reality around the people of God should be addressed from a Biblical point of view. A very select group of prophets, a smaller group of prophets have been used by God to communicate the infallible Word of God to the people of God.

So, if you believe the gift of prophecy is still in operation in the Church today, it is important to make a distinction between prophets who speak the infallible word of God - we could call those "capital P" Prophets, like we did with the "capital A" Apostles. We should distinguish between those Prophets with what we might call "little p" prophets, who are led by the Spirit to apply the word of God to the contemporary circumstances of the Church in society, but who are not themselves speaking the revealed Word of God. The importance of the distinction is both to recognize that "capital P" prophecy has ended with the establishment of the canon. We are not expecting prophets today to give us Scripture. So even when the Holy Spirit is leading people to communicate truth from God today to apply in our society, we do not give that communication the same level of authority as the Bible. We see the prophets applying the Bible, and not producing new Bible. When a person claims to speak the very Word of God, they must be held to the highest possible standards. If you claim that you know your word if from God, there is a Biblical standard that applies to you, and it's in Deuteronomy 18:20-22, which states,

²⁰ 'But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.' ²¹ 'You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?' ²² "When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.

If somebody is going to stand up and say, "You are speaking from the Word of God," we should expect 100% precision and we should keep them accountable. That is not a standard you want to bring on yourself. If you believe that God is speaking through you for someone else, I would recommend taking a humble approach, not saying, "God tells me to tell you," but instead saying, "I believe that God has given me a word for you. Or it seems to me the Spirit is saying..." Come at it with some humility, recognizing that you might be wrong. It might not be the Spirit you're feeling. This is a bigger discussion. And Luke does not give us here anything to help us understand the nature of prophecy among the early Church, or how it should be understood after the formation of the New Testament. I am bringing this up briefly because we've already had some prophets and we're going to hit more prophets as we go through Acts. And I am comfortable with it being a little ambiguous in the book of Acts, because we are in transition. We don't yet have the New Covenant. And we know that Paul was speaking the very Word of God at times. So, I'm okay with this being a unique reality but for us, we need to make a distinction. I would agree that a kind of spiritual gift that we can call, "prophecy," is available today, but I would not agree that the "capital P" Prophecy of revealed Word on the level of Scripture is available today. Nobody's words get put up on that level. I know that's debatable. I'm just letting you know where I stand as I teach through Acts.

To distinguish teachers from prophets, I recognize the gift of teaching as helping people understand the Word of God intellectually, emotionally, and practically. The gifts are similar, but for a prophet I'm looking at more specifically addressing current social or political reality and applying Bible to that reality. And the teacher is more broadly addressing spiritual truth without a definite focus on how it applies in our current social situation. And I personally would call myself a teacher, but not a prophet.

We do not know much about these prophets and teachers who provide leadership for the Antioch assembly. The list starts with Barnabas who we know. The second prophet-teacher mentioned is Simeon, also called Niger, apparently because of his dark complexion, since "niger" is "black" in Latin. Lucius is a common Latin name. He is from the province of Cyrene, which is modern day Libya on the northern coast of Africa to the west of Egypt. Lucius could have been one of the original founders of the church since those men were from Cyprus and Cyrene, but we don't know. Manaen is the Greek form of the Hebrew word for, "comforter." So maybe he is another Barnabas. He was from a high level of Jewish society, being raised with Herod Antipas. That's not the Herod whose death we just read about, but the son of Herod the Great who killed John the Baptist. That Herod was born in 4 BC, so Manaen is an older man in his fifties. And Saul completes this interesting band of brothers who served together in Antioch.

Luke tells us they were ministering to the Lord and fasting. Ministering to the Lord had a more specific sense in the Old Covenant when a priest performed ceremony in the Temple. He was ministering to the Lord. In the New Covenant sense, it takes a broader meaning, like the idea in Romans 12:1 of offering your body as a sacrifice, which is your spiritual service or worship. That language from Paul evoked the images of a priest in the Temple but when you look at the application in Romans 12:13-14, everything you do is your spiritual service of worship. So your service to the Lord, or ministering to the Lord could apply to any role you are fulfilling for the sake of the Lord.

Interpreting this passage, one option would be that, as these men are performing their ministries of prophesying and teaching during a time of fasting, the Holy Spirit lead one of them to prophesy directly in regard to Barnabas and Paul that they should be set apart for a special mission. Another option is to read ministering to the Lord as a worship gathering. And the congregation may have assembled together in worship, and they were fasting, and in that assembly the Holy Spirit gave the message as they ministered to God in worship. However, we interpret ministering to the Lord, we clearly see these leaders engaged with God. They are worshiping, they are doing ministry, and they are expressing devotion through fasting. We also see clearly the initiative of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who said, "Now is the time. Set them apart for what they need to do."

The Missionary Vision of the Leaders

We do not know if the assembly in Antioch had been thinking about taking the Gospel to other provinces in the Roman Empire. This church started with a missionary vision when Jews from the Jerusalem persecution crossed the Jew-Gentile barrier to give witness to Jesus Christ. Perhaps they had already begun to seek God's direction about a missionary journey. They were certainly receptive when the Holy Spirit said, "Set them apart," and then you said, "Set them apart for what?" Set apart for a missionary journey. So we don't know if that was already in their minds if the Holy Spirit said even more. Whatever the case, they were ready; they were prepared; they were mentally and emotionally on board with the idea of going into missions.

Luke makes clear to us through reference to the Holy Spirit that the plan to go to the Gentiles is not first Antioch's agenda. This is God's agenda. By embracing that missionary agenda, that agenda of God's became the agenda of Antioch: the agenda of the assembly. They embrace God's mission. So, we also notice that they send their best into the mission field. Can you imagine a large, growing, fruitful church led by two very prominent leaders in the Christian world choosing to embrace the idea of missions by sending out both of their famous leaders? I find that pretty hard to imagine that

any church with one famous leader would give them up, but a church with two well-known famous leaders would give both of them. And yet, that is what they did. They sent their best.

And before sending Barnabas and Paul, they set them apart. That is what we mean when we use the word, commissioned. To commission is set apart for a mission. It may mean that they are commissioned by the authority of the church in Antioch. Or it may mean that the church in Antioch recognizes the will of God for this to happen, without a sense of authorizing the mission. They accept it as God's will, and they agree with it. We will have to consider Paul's relationship to Antioch later when we have more to go on.

So, without bringing into question of authority, we see here the church calling on God to bless Paul and Barnabas. Fasting and praying and laying on hands is how they do that. "God, bless these two brothers as they seek to fulfill the work you have called them to do!" Something like that. The church joins in with God's agenda for the salvation of people from every nation by taking time to gather in prayer and fasting, and having a service of blessing for Barnabas and Paul. They send them out wholeheartedly, but not with the idea that they are sending them out by their own initiative. Their wholeheartedness comes from willing submission to the Holy Spirit. Luke makes that clear in verse 4, "So being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia..."

A Power Encounter on Cyprus (13:4-12)

The church in Antioch would have had to wait some time for word to come back detailing the outcome of the mission. We don't have to wait at all. The second half of this passage is like reading Paul and Barnabas' first missionary prayer letter describing where they went, their initial success and a serious power encounter. This is Acts 13:4-12,

⁴ So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵ When they reached Salamis, they *began* to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper. ⁶ When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, ⁷ who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. ⁸ But Elymas the magician (for so his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. ⁹ But Saul, who was also *known as* Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him, ¹⁰ and said, "You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord?" ¹¹ "Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time." And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. ¹² Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.

The Gospel Goes Out To Jews And Then To Gentiles

Intentional Gospel mission began through the initiative of the Holy Spirit. And in the first report we receive back from the mission, Luke describes a power encounter between Paul, a servant of the Holy Spirit, and Elymas, described as a son of the devil. Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is an attack on the kingdom of darkness. The terms of salvation are non-negotiable. People who live in the kingdom of darkness will be threatened by the Gospel and will push back.

Seleucia is the port town of Antioch, also founded by the first king of the Seleucid Empire. From there, they sailed to Barnabas' home island Cyprus. They landed at Salamis on the northeastern side of the island and worked their way to Paphos on the southwestern side. So, kind of a diagonal down through the island. We are told for the first time that John, whose Greek name is Mark, had come along as a junior member of the missionary team.

We are also told that Barnabas and Paul proclaimed the Word of God in the synagogue of the Jews. And Paul will continue to follow that pattern. Even though he plans to preach to Gentiles wherever

he goes, he routinely begins his proclamation ministry in the synagogue. There may be multiple reasons for this strategy. Theologically, Paul may recognize an obligation to go to the Jews first, not because they have greater value in God's eyes, but because God made specific promise to the Jews and as God's ambassador, professing the arrival of the Messiah shows the faithfulness of God in keeping His promises. And also, since the Jews everywhere do profess to believe in Yahweh and to be waiting expectantly for the Messiah, they should rightly expect someone claiming to be sent by Yahweh to immediately bring them the news of the Messiah's coming. I imagine this would be apparent to Jews and Gentiles. It would sound strange to Gentiles if Paul came proclaiming the Messiah of the Jews and they asked, "So, what did our Jews say when you told them?" "Oh, I have not made it around to the synagogue, yet." "But didn't you say they have been expecting King David's Greater Son to return for about 600 years ever since Jerusalem fell to Babylon?" "I did say that, but you know, I am not really sure they want to hear about the Messiah. I'll get to them." "Ok. That's weird."

I think it would sound odd to show up in a town proclaiming the Jewish Messiah without talking to the Jews. It would sound odd to the Gentiles, and it would sound antagonistic to the Jews to be setting yourself up in opposition to them. Paul is not responsible for the response of the Jews in a given town. He is responsible to share with them the Good News of the Messiah. And he would have to, in order to maintain credibility with Jew and Gentile. No matter how much he wanted to build bridges with Gentiles, he is not going to deny or alter the basic fact of the Gospel that Jesus was born to a Jewish family as the long expected Jewish Messiah. Working out from that historical reality, Paul will declare that the Jewish Messiah is also the Savior of the World.

Paul does not expect to find reception among all Jews. He knows himself how violently he responded to the Good News when he first heard. Paul knows they will have to deal with that segment of the synagogue, the Law-abiding, Pharisaic segment that zealously opposes him. They are also going to have to deal with the syncretic segment, those Jews who have mixed Jewish belief with the paganism of Roman society. In our day, we face a similar syncretic problem with those who profess to be Christian, and yet combine Christian beliefs and terminology with a very modern mixture of New Age, or Near Eastern, or self-help spirituality. People who claim to speak for Jesus in society but have separated Jesus from the revelation in the New Testament. Paul and Barnabas encounter something like that here in the Jew Elymas.

The Gospel Stands Strong Against Religious Syncretism

Sergius Paulus, the very Roman sounding proconsul or governor of Cyprus hears of Paul and Barnabas and, apparently, forms a positive opinion of them. He summons them. That's how you get an audience with a Roman governor. You are summoned. You don't just show up. Elymas, the Jewish magician, had also made an impression on Sergius Paulus. Ironically, his Hebrew name is Bar-Jesus, son of the savior. You know, very spiritual-sounding name. Apparently, he has gained the status of spiritual advisor or counselor to the proconsul. It is not surprising that a Roman interested in Jewish teaching would initially make little distinction between the message of Bar-Jesus and the message of Paul. I see that in Zagreb in the Muslim immigrant community. It is not unusual for spiritually seeking Muslims to view the Nazarenes, the Baptists, the Roman Catholics, the Seventh Day Adventists, and the Jehovah Witnesses as all basically the same: they are all Christian. My friends Shayan and Donya just discovered that one of the women in their church was recently baptized by the Mormons. She had not stopped coming to their church. She did not see a significant difference. I think these people coming from a completely Muslim culture are just as confused as we would be if we were introduced at the same time to three Muslims, one Sunni, one Shia, and one Sufi. We know about Allah and Muhammad and the pilgrimage to Mecca, but that's about where our knowledge ends, so the

distinction between Muslim groups would be beyond us. So, there is no surprise here that Sergius Paulus is willing to hear both from Elymas and Paul and Barnabas. They're Jews. They have some credibility. They're interesting. And he might be surprised to learn that Elymas and Paul have anything significant to disagree about.

Elymas, on the other hand, immediately feels threatened by Paul. He knows. He sees Sergius Paulus' attraction to the Word of God preached by Paul, and he seeks to turn him away from the faith. Paul's response is fierce. "You blind guide. You whitewashed tomb full of dead men's bones. You serpent. You viper who makes others twice as much a son of hell as yourself." Wait, no, that's not Paul, is it? Whose words were those? That's Jesus. That's Matthew 23. Paul says, "You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord?" Paul's words are harsh, but if we compare the two, if there is any difference, Jesus' words are the harsher words.

It is a common modern mistake to downplay the wrath of Jesus. Like, somehow, Paul is fiercer than Jesus. That's not good Bible reading. But you'll notice both with Jesus and with Paul, it's not easy to bring out this level of intensity. It doesn't happen much in the Gospels for Jesus, and it doesn't happen a lot in Acts with Paul. So, what brought about that verbal assault in Matthew 23? Jesus' words are aimed at the Pharisees. And He delivered eight woes or curses, repeatedly accusing them of hypocrisy. The legalism of the Pharisees is quite different from the syncretism of Elymas. What makes them similar is that both claim to represent Yahweh, and in their positions of influence over others they both denounce the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It makes me also remember the harsh words of Jesus for a person who causes one of the little ones to stumble. Something about a millstone being tied around your neck.

Neither Jesus nor Paul respond to non-Jews this way. Neither Jesus nor Paul respond to individual sinners this way. If it were a matter of Elymas rejecting Paul himself in a one-to-one conversation, I don't think we'd get Paul confronting him in wrath like this. But by taking a position of influence at this high level of society - so the Pharisees Jesus were confronting had an influence on all of Jewish society - and this Elymas has the ear of the proconsul of the island. has taken on the role of a false prophet of Yahweh. He is pretending to be something he is not, and he is using that position to keep Sergius Paulus and through him, the people of Cyprus, bound by a false message, and he is doing it simply to maintain his own position. So, to claim to speak for Yahweh while rejecting the Gospel of Jesus Christ and promoting a false revelation with influence over other people, that is a way to bring the wrath of God on yourself. That is true of legalistic Christian ministers and liberal New Age Christian ministers. That is not a position you want to set yourself up in.

And the result here is the kind of power encounter you might expect in the day of Elijah. Notice once more, it is not initiated by Paul. This is a power encounter between the spirit of darkness whose influence lies behind the deception of Elymas, and the Holy Spirit. These are His words and His actions as He works through His servant Paul. Paul does not strike Elymas blind. The Holy Spirit strikes Elymas blind. He is in fact a blind guide, leading the blind. And the Holy Spirit causes his physical reality to match his spiritual state.

And what should that remind us of? Somebody being struck blind in the book of Acts?

"You will be blind and not see the sun for some time...and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand." It says that Elymas would be led by the hand but what I just quoted is from Acts 9, when the curse of God fell on Paul. Paul could say, "I once was blind but now I see." We do not know whether Elymas is going to get the message or not. So, the curse on him is an opportunity for repentance. But it's also a protection of the proconsul.

The result that we see, what we do know is that the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord. The result in this case is not only the salvation of an individual. The result is the salvation of individual who has significant influence over tens of thousands of people living on this strategically located island off the coast of Asia minor. The Gospel had already begun to spread on the island. And rather than exerting influence to quell that growth, this Roman governor is going to believe and support that growth.

Intentional Gospel mission initiates power encounters. We cannot mitigate the terms of salvation. We cannot make compromise in agreement with the spirits of darkness, with the spirit of this age. There is no other name by which a person can be saved other than the name Jesus Christ. You cannot do Christian ministry without communicating that fact. That is our witness. No other name but Jesus. And we do not define who Jesus is. Jesus is not your best friend who doesn't care if you sin. That's not Jesus. We receive the truth that He has revealed about Himself. He is God. He is Savior. He is the one who became man and died to pay for the penalty of death we owe for our sins. Death could not hold him. He rose from the grave. He ascended into heaven. He sits at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. All who believe in His name are born again of the Spirit and enter into His Kingdom.

When Jesus came into the world, He initiated a power encounter against the forces of darkness. Hating the light, the ones He came to save put him to death. When the messengers of Jesus go out into the world to proclaim the Gospel, they will be opposed. The natural state of humankind is opposition to the spiritual truth of Jesus Christ. And yet, as we see here at the beginning of Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey, the power of darkness in this world is no match for the power of the Spirit of God who sends out His people.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 12:25-13:12. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Why might Paul describe the leaders in Antioch as prophets and teachers rather than elders?
3. By whose authority are Paul and Barnabas sent out? Whose idea is it? What role do the apostles in Jerusalem play? What role do the elders play? What role do Paul and Barnabas play? What role does the Holy Spirit play?
4. What questions do you have about the Christian assembly, leadership and missionary vision in Antioch that cannot be answered from this brief text? Which of those questions do you think might be addressed later in Acts?
5. What stands out to you when you consider Sergius Paulus and Elymas? What parallel to these two men do you see in your own culture and times?
6. Do you expect such displays of power in your own gospel witness as you see here with Paul? Why or why not? (How does the rest of the New Testament help you think about that?)
7. What are less dramatic, but very real ways that you see the power of the gospel at work? What are some ways the power of the gospel confronts the kind of religious syncretism (mixing of traditional religion and societal spiritualism) that you see in your own culture?