

THE EXPLOSIVE CHURCH

(7) New Horizons.

Acts chapter 13 begins with a list of the leaders in the church at Antioch, who we have already seen were quite a mixture of race, upbringing and culture, yet were one in heart and mind as they sought to serve their God and bring His good news to all those around them. They had a great impact on both Jews and Gentiles of that great Syrian city which stood as a bridge between east and west, yet their missional outlook led them to lift their eyes to broader horizons where myriads of people still needed to hear of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Maybe this caused them to gather for special prayer and fasting to seek the mind of God, and in **verse 3** we read of the answer – “The Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’” The next 2 chapters tell the story of that first great outreach into the wider world, as the supportive church commissioned their 2 chief leaders, identifying with them by placing their hands on them, and sent them off with their blessing. This first missionary journey began a world ministry which was destined to change the history of Europe and the world.

Uncle Barnabas quite naturally chose Mark as their assistant, and just as naturally they began their journey by sailing to Cyprus, the sprawling Mediterranean island that was an ancient meeting-place of nations, and where there were large settlements of Jews. Barnabas in particular would want to begin by bringing the gospel message to his own homefolk, and it was natural that they should start by preaching to the Jews – and God-fearing Gentiles – who gathered in the synagogues.

How much should home ties affect our ministry for God? How can we get our priorities right?

A Significant Milestone.

Verses 6-12 . It is interesting to note that, just as the Gentile Cornelius sought the truth from Peter, so Sergius Paulus, the Roman proconsul of Cyprus, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God! But just as “good” Jews had resisted the apostles’ teaching about Christ, so here a “bad” Jew tried to turn away this Gentile from the gospel! And it was here that Saul took the initiative, confronting the evil Elymas and miraculously bringing him the judgement of temporary blindness. Note that Saul called him “a child of the devil” - a term only used by him (and by Christ) of someone who deliberately opposed God’s programme – a veritable enemy of God – and not sinful men in general. By adding the name “Bar-Jesus” to himself, Elymas was claiming to be the son of Jesus – an utter contradiction to his behaviour! No wonder Saul censured him so severely! If a medical doctor tried to dupe his patients by pretending to be what he was not, the law would immediately condemn him for the damage he could do. How much more damage is done by counterfeit “Christians”!

This is the first recorded miracle wrought through Saul: perhaps Luke did this deliberately to show him to his readers as having the same status as Peter. In any case, it had the effect of bringing to a personal faith in Christ the deep-thinking Sergius Paulus, who would from that time on have wielded a great influence on the whole island through his position of authority.

And it was here, in **verse 9**, that Luke first uses Saul’s Roman name of Paul, a Gentile name for the one who was to bring the first rays of light to Gentiles far and wide. From here on, Paul took the leadership while Barnabas fell into the role of second-in-command. Barnabas, being the gracious man he was, seemed not to mind, but we wonder what effect that had upon his young nephew Mark. Was he miffed on behalf of his uncle who had lost his position of leadership? There may have been another factor in his retreat. In **Galatians 4:13** Paul speaks of an illness that had plagued him on this first visit. The climate of the coastal region around Perga is extremely enervating, and it may be that here, where they had landed from Cyprus, Paul fell victim to the malaria endemic to the place. It seems strange that they did not stay to preach in Perga, but went straight on to Antioch in Pisidia in the highlands, where Paul would find relief and recovery, though the way there was perilous and rife with bandits. So maybe young Mark found it all overwhelming and fled, homesick, to the security of Jerusalem.

Do we judge Mark for his desertion? What would we have done? Paul was deeply disappointed and loath to give him a second chance. Yet we see later that, through Barnabas, he did have a second chance, was

reconciled to Paul, and wrote the first record of Jesus' life and death. Can you think of other people in the Bible who were given a second chance? How often has God given you a second chance?

A very different Antioch!

It was the policy of the apostles, in any new place, to start their preaching in the synagogue, where there would be Jews well acquainted with the Old Testament, able to perceive that Israel was simply the forerunner of the Messiah who was to come into the world, and who could then form a strong nucleus of believers in the Christian faith. In **Acts 13:13-52** we see this policy implemented. In **verses 16,17** Paul addresses the "Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God", then goes straight to the roots of the history – "The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers." From there he outlines Israel's coming to nationhood with David as their king, and brings the story up-to-date in **verse 23**, "From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Saviour Jesus, as he promised." He spoke so convincingly that many Jews and converts to Judaism accepted his message joyfully. The news spread like wildfire and by the following Sabbath "almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord." (**Verse 44.**)

Alas, this Antioch was not as open-minded as the Antioch in Syria, which had sent Paul and Barnabas out! At sight of the crowds the orthodox Jews were filled with jealousy that some upstart should wield an influence greater than theirs, and began a slanderous campaign against them.

This marked a huge turning point in Paul's life. In **verses 46,47** he and Barnabas declared sternly that while it was the right thing to give to them first the word of life, their rejection would bring about their death. "Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life," Paul says with biting sarcasm, "*we now turn to the Gentiles.*" And that is just what they did. **Verse 48** shows us the contrast – "When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord." This word spread through the whole region until the furious non-believing Jews incited even God-fearing men and women of influence to stir up persecution against the apostles. Discretion being the better part of valour, Paul and Barnabas moved on quickly – yet the chapter ends on a triumphant note with **verse 52** – "The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit."

Once again we see that the worst enemies of the church are found inside it! The unbelieving Jews did far more damage than any of the pagans around them. Sadly, this still applies today, where some church members have the effect of turning outsiders away from the Church altogether. And it applies to our individual lives, where our worst enemy is the spirit of disobedience inside us, not the unbelieving friends around us. What is the answer to this dilemma?

Eastward to Iconium, Lystra and Derbe.

Acts 14:1-20. **Iconium** was located on a plateau of fertile plains and forests about 140 kilometres from Antioch, rich in history and prosperous. Here the preaching of Paul and Barnabas was effective enough to persuade many Jews and Gentiles, yet once again the unbelieving Jews stirred up trouble by poisoning the minds of the believers against the preachers. Apart from anything else, it was their pride that was hurt: it was not easy for people who considered themselves to be "God's chosen race" and therefore specially privileged, to accept the fact that their whole national history only had significance in light of its consummation – the coming of Jesus the Messiah! That is the crux of the message Paul gives in his letter to the Galatians – Galatia being the name of the area in which these cities lay.

Here, however, the persecution was limited to slander and this may have been because Iconium was governed in the Greek way by its local assembly, and the Romans did not declare this new religion illegal. Thus the people were divided in opinion but no militant action was taken, so that Paul and Barnabas were able to stay there for quite some time, only leaving when at last they came under threat of being stoned. Iconium was later to become a major centre for the spread of the gospel.

How much damage is done by pride – in governments, institutions, personal relationships and sadly, churches? Look up Philippians 2:5-8 for the example Jesus gave us to follow as His disciples! 1 Peter 5:6 exhorts us to "humble yourselves under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time." From Him alone comes our true honour!

With divinely-inspired insistence, Paul and Barnabas continued their preaching in the next city to the east, **Lystra**. Here there was no synagogue, so they were addressing a predominantly pagan audience. It is interesting that the miracle recorded in **Acts 3** is repeated almost exactly here, with Paul the main figure instead of Peter, as if Luke wanted to emphasise that from now on, Paul was the great “mover and shaker” of the Christian movement. An inscription has been found in Lystra, dedicating a statue to Zeus and Hermes: the reaction of the pagans was naturally that their gods had come down to visit them and it was only with great difficulty that Paul and Barnabas prevented the crowd from worshipping them with a sacrifice! But then we see that those pesky Jews came all the way from Antioch and Iconium to stir up trouble, whereupon the fickle, ungrateful crowd flung stones instead of honours. We can only imagine what Paul went through, being dragged along the ground *after being stoned*, and appearing to be dead from his wounds. Through the grace of God he was able to stand up, walk to his lodgings, and the very next day, to depart on a further hike eastwards. We learn later that Timothy was from Lystra: was this when he became a follower of Christ? He must have admired Paul’s courage. He certainly had a wonderful example, with Paul, of “enduring hardship like a good soldier of Christ Jesus”, as Paul encouraged him to do in **2 Timothy 2:3!**

Timothy would have heard Paul’s preaching and also watched his behaviour under stress. Which aspect of Paul do you think would have impressed him more? Which is the more effective in winning people to Christ? Is one any use without the other?

And so Paul and Barnabas came to **Derbe**, where once again they won a large number of disciples. No persecution is recorded here, so perhaps those Jews had given up! We don’t know how long they stayed: an educated guess by theologians is that this whole journey lasted about 2 years. Looking at the map we see that Tarsus lay just across the Taurus mountains, and we wonder if Paul would have longed to go back home through his own native city. However, he knew the need of the young churches he had founded and, with supreme courage, he and Barnabas took the route right back through the centres of their recent persecution! Paul was a brilliant church-planter: he quickly prepared them for independence, not hanging around until they became dependent on him, yet returning to them to teach them and deepen their spiritual maturity, not to increase his personal following. Like a wise parent, he maintained a healthy balance between concern for the churches and trust that God could keep and guide them in his absence: he knew when to “let go.” And so in each church he appointed elders: enough time had elapsed since their initial contact, for qualities of leadership to emerge from the new converts. His letters to the various churches indicate his ongoing love and concern for them and indeed, his gratitude to God for the growth he saw in them.

And so they came back to Perga and this time they preached the gospel there. Then they took a ship back to their church in Antioch – and I think that voyage must have been a much-needed rest for them both! Hopefully they didn’t get seasick. I would like to have been there at their homecoming – their eager congregation rejoicing at the exciting tales they could tell of adventure, success, trials, dangers and above all, the wonderful grace of God. It would have been good for the church to hear the confirmation that God had opened the door to the Gentiles and their welcoming joy would have been balm to both Paul and Barnabas. No wonder they stayed in Antioch for a long time, receiving gratefully the love and care of the church members, just as they had given out so much of themselves on their journey.

We appreciate our pastors but often we come to rely too heavily on them for guidance and support. We need to remember that they too are human and need our support. How about a cup of tea, brought to them after the service when they are too busy talking to people to get one for themselves? How about an encouraging word of appreciation and an assurance that we are praying for them? How about keeping quiet if we notice a slip-up in carrying out some duty? And how about studying the Bible by ourselves or in groups, instead of just waiting to be spoon-fed from the pulpit? Paul in his letters often speaks of the joy and strengthening that came to him through this “partnership in the gospel.” It is what Jesus desires for His Church.

