

Well, this past week we survived another season of going through the process of a federal election in Canada. I say “survived” in that it seems that the process of voting for leaders has become more like a war than an election. Even the media took notice this time, when a number of them stated that “for polite Canada, the latest federal election campaign turned out to be pretty nasty” – with potential leaders on every level focused on inflicting maximum damage on their rivals, rather than humbly promoting their own character and agenda in how they would serve their constituents. One could say that politicians in our day have forgotten that they are in the business of leadership not assassination. When we don’t know what our business is, we will not accomplish our intended purpose. History tells us that telegraph companies thought that they were in the telegraph business. But they failed to realize that they were really in the communications business. And so in 1886 they had the opportunity to buy all of the telephone patents for about \$40,000. But they didn’t. And they ultimately went out of business.

What is the main business of the church? Some would say that it is to take care of its members – in that we are to grow in our faith and fellowship and care for one another, providing guidance and comfort as we go through the transitions and struggles, as we live out our lives in a fallen world. No doubt, these are all functions of the church. But none of these is main business of the church. The truth be told, the church is always facing the danger of slipping into a self-focus maintenance mentality - where it focuses on maintaining a religious club mentality by preserving sacred positions and personal traditions - as it drifts away from the main business of the church. Pastor Erwin McManus, once said, “We somehow think that the Church is here for us; we forget that we are here for the world.” John Piper declares: “The book of Acts is a constant indictment of mere maintenance Christianity. It’s a constant goad and encouragement and stimulation to fan the flame of Advent – that the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost. But even then, we forget that the main goal of evangelism and missions is not so much about reaching the lost, but to glorify God – because the glory of God is the supreme goal of all of history. Ephesians 1:12 declares that Jesus came to save sinners *“to the praise of the glory of His grace.”*

In our text in Acts 13 today we will see that the main business of the church is to obey the calling of the Holy Spirit by promoting the glory of God by sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ out in our community and out among all the nations of the world. Our mission statement, that we seek to - “Passionately proclaiming the glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people” - fits that pretty well. What we will also see in Acts 13, which we have also experienced, is that when the church does seek to focus on the main business of the church, the church will experience conflict and opposition, from within and without. Jesus promised us that would happen. In Matthew 10:34-36 he said: *“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.”* The Word of God tells us that when we take a stand for Jesus Christ, and when we share the glorious grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we will encounter opposition and experience conflict. The gospel is the good news, but its also the good news that divides.

The thirteenth chapter is a turning point in the book of Acts in that it marks the beginning of the third phase of the Great Commission. In the opening chapter of Acts, before Jesus ascended into the heavens, he said to his disciples, *“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”* (Acts 1:8). Everything Jesus told them, happens in Acts 1-13. In Chapter 13 we are at the beginning of the last phase of going *“to the end of the earth.”* It is also the beginning of the apostleship of Paul. Up to this time, though he was called to be an apostle when he was first converted on the Damascus road, Paul has never acted as an apostle. Now, about twelve years later, he begins to finally fulfill the ministry to which he was called to be an apostle of Jesus. This section also begins with probably the most important thing we need know about the business of the church and that’s how the Holy Spirit leads God’s people in the church.

We read the opening words of Acts 13 in the context of Acts 12, where we read that the gospel of Jesus Christ was being proclaimed and many were coming to faith in Jesus Christ throughout Judea. And Acts 12 closes with Luke telling us that: *“Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark”* (Acts 12-25).

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. 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.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. Acts 13:1-3

Now the scene now shifts back to Antioch where we read that the Holy Spirit prompted the leaders of the church in Antioch to ordain Barnabas to the calling of fulfilling the third phase of Jesus’ Great Commission to proclaim the gospel *“to the end of the earth.”* This is the same process the church uses today in recognizing those in the Body of Christ who are to be set apart for a particular work as pastors, missionaries, chaplains and spiritual leaders. While some of that recognition comes from the qualifications and character qualities recorded in the Bible – the first and foremost recognition of that calling is the work of the Holy Spirit as revealed to the church. This an important point because there are many people that will seek to do things in the name of God that have not been sent by God. We’ve already seen that in previous chapters in all of the warnings regarding false prophets and false teachers.

We see that here is when the Holy Spirit revealed His call for Barnabas and Saul to the church leaders in Antioch - they recognized the Spirit’s call and they fasted and prayed and ordained Barnabas and Saul and sent them out to their ministry *“to the end of the earth.”* The key here is that the church leaders recognized the moving of the Holy Spirit and then responded accordingly. Barnabas and Saul worked as part of a team but also submitted themselves to counsel and direction given by the church leaders.

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. Acts 13:4-5

Here Luke tells us that Barnabas and Saul’s journey began as they travel down to Seleucia, a Syrian seaport from which they sail to the city of Salamis which is on the southeastern side of the Island of Cyprus. We know that the gospel had already reached that island as it was believers from Cyprus that came to Antioch and proclaimed the gospel to the Gentiles. There is speculation that Barnabas and Paul came to Cyprus because Barnabas was from there. Whatever the reason, the first place that they went to proclaim the word of God was the synagogues of the Jews. Paul comments in Romans 1:16 that the gospel is the power of God for the salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. So throughout Paul’s missionary journeys to the ends of the earth, he would always put that principle into practice by first seeking to proclaim the gospel of Jesus as Lord and Savior to the Jews.

It is significant that in verse 5 Luke tells us that Barnabas’ cousin John (Mark), who had come up from Jerusalem with them when they returned to Antioch, was also going with them on this journey as their helper. It is significant to point out *because* there is nothing to indicate that the Holy Spirit set aside John Mark for this ministry. Barnabas and Saul are specifically mentioned in verse 2, but John Mark is not. While there could be a number of good reasons why they wanted to take John Mark with them to help, there will be some issues and struggles and consequences to this decision later on.

When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, "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? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. Acts 13:6-12

Here we read that after Barnabas and Paul proclaimed Jesus Christ in Salamis they continued on their journey overland to Paphos, the capital city on the opposite side of the island. When they got to Paphos they ran into a magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus/Elymas, who was with the proconsul named Sergius Paulus. Luke tells us that the proconsul was "*a man of intelligence*" and that he summoned Barnabas and Saul, wanting to hear the word of God. But Elymas/Bar-Jesus the Jewish false prophet/magician opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from coming to faith in Jesus.

But Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, confronted Elymas' opposition. First he revealed Elymas' true character of being full of deceit, a villain and a son of the devil. The word "*deceit*" here in the original language means "a snare" which appears to be something safe and inviting, but in reality it is a trap. The word "*villainy*" in the original Greek means "reckless unscrupulous wickedness." "*Son of the devil*" refers to Elymas' character matching that of the devil. Rather than being "*Bar-Jesus*," a name referring to someone who spoke of salvation in the Lord, but in reality he was the "*Son of the Devil*" - and therefore someone who was characterized by slander, which he was doing against Barnabas and Saul. Elymas' actions of "*making crooked the straight paths of the Lord*" rose out of his character. Saul takes further action and made Bar-Jesus' physical condition match his spiritual condition by blinding him.

Brothers and sisters - we live in an age and in a country and in a culture that highly values tolerance and unconditional acceptance as being of the highest virtues. They are not. There is absolutely nothing wrong with exposing the true character of those who are false and who oppose the truth. As a result of Paul's exposure of Elymas being a villain and deceiver "*the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.*" Historical records seem to back up the conversion of the proconsul. The British scholar William Ramsay has "argued from other literary sources that Sergia Paulla, the proconsul's daughter, was a Christian as was her son Gaius Caristianus Fronto, who became the first citizen of Pisidian Antioch to enter the Roman senate."

When we proclaim the glorious grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ we engage the enemy of our souls in spiritual combat. When we do the Lord's work, we should expect and be prepared for satanic opposition that will be done through those who are deceived by the devil. Sharing the good news of gospel with someone involves more than giving a sales pitch or using logical arguments. We are engaging in a battle with Satan himself, who wants to keep that person in his kingdom of darkness. So the Holy Spirit sent Barnabas and Saul directly into this spiritual conflict. We see this in the ministry of Jesus, when the Holy Spirit led him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Luke 4:1-13).

Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem. Acts 13:13

After the confronting and winning the battle of the spiritual opposition against the glorious gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ – Paul, Barnabas and John Mark travel by sea to Perga in Pamphylia on the coast of Turkey. It is here John Mark leaves them for unstated reasons and returns to Jerusalem.

Here we see that the battle with evil against the gospel is not limited those who we perceive as our enemy. Spiritual warfare against the praise of the glory of God's grace in the gospel of Jesus Christ can occur with those who are close to us. Jesus said: *"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household."* We do not know why John Mark left Paul and Barnabas. From the argument that occurs between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark in Acts 15 we can safely assume that this departure was without Paul's approval. Remember that there is no indication that the Holy Spirit had set aside John Mark for this work. Though there could have been many good reasons to take him along, the reality is that for whatever reason he was not ready for this ministry and he returned to Jerusalem. In His grace, God brought about John Mark's departure before he would become a detriment in the more difficult ministries that Paul and Barnabas would face as they went into the interior of Asia Minor.

The good news about John Mark is that though he failed here, he did mature and became an effective servant of Jesus Christ. In 2 Timothy 4:11 Paul tells Timothy to bring Mark with him *"for he is very useful to me for ministry."* Tradition states that John Mark eventually wrote the gospel of Mark for Peter. In the Kingdom of God, failure in an attempt is not disqualification. God is in the business of redeeming us and equipping us to proclaim the glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people.

But they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it."
Acts 13:14-15

These verses tell the story after Mark's departure. Paul and Barnabas leave Perga on the coastal plain and travel inland to Pisidian Antioch. This name distinguishes it from other cities also named Antioch. On the Sabbath day after they arrived and Paul followed his normal practice of going to the Jews first in the local synagogues. According to Jewish custom a visiting Jew, and especially a teacher, would be invited to address them. They extended this honor to Paul and Barnabas. Paul agrees to do so and so he preaches a sermon that contains the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ for the Jews.

So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said: "Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen. The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it. And for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness. And after destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance. All this took about 450 years. And after that he gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.' Of this man's offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised. Before his coming, John had proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And as John was finishing his course, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but behold, after me one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.'

"Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation. For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him. And though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. And when they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, "'You are my Son, today I have begotten you.'

And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way, “‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.’ Therefore he says also in another psalm, “‘You will not let your Holy One see corruption.’ For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, but he whom God raised up did not see corruption. Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. Acts 13:16-39

In preaching the gospel to an audience of Jews - Paul laid before them the truths were the basis for the hope for forgiveness of sin for all Jews. They could not be freed from sin by keeping the Law of Moses, but they could be forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ who fulfilled the prophecies of God’s Word. Paul then concludes his sermon with a warning:

Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about: “‘Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish; for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you.””
Acts 13:40-41

Now this is not the way that our contemporary pastors and evangelists end their sermons over concern of offending their listeners, but it is the way that Paul usually ended his. Paul’s concern was that his listeners would not fear God enough to heed his message. Paul was more concerned about the eternal destiny of those who heard him than in gaining a large audience. We should do the same. Amen?

As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath. And after the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God. Acts 13:42-43

The initial reaction to Paul’s sermon and warning was so positive that people begged to hear more on the next Sabbath. Some were so encouraged by his message that they were following him to learn more. But by now we should understand that when we proclaim the gospel rightly, we should expect division.

The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him. And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, “‘It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, “‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”” Acts 13:44-47

One of the marks of true evangelism is always that those who are being affected by it are divided. They are either for it or against it. No neutrality is possible when the gospel is preached in the power of the Holy Spirit. You would think that everyone would welcome such good news. But the fact is, many hate it. Why the hate? Why the division? Because the glorious gospel of God’s grace is God’s good news, not man’s good news. Luke emphasizes this. He refers twice to “*the word of God*” in verses 44 and 46 – and he will refer twice to “*the word of the Lord*” in verses 48 and 49. In other words, the gospel did not originate with religiously clever men thinking up how we can be reconciled with God. All of the world’s religions that originate with man or satan involve a system of human works that supposedly will bring us into harmony with God. All these systems have one thing in common: they affirm the autonomy of humanity to bring glory to themselves because salvation is by human effort. But the glorious gospel of God’s grace is altogether different. It wipes out all ground for our boasting. It takes away every human work, and attributes salvation to God alone, who chose us before the foundation of the world, before we ever did anything. We are saved only by the grace of God. While divisive, that is really good news.

And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region. But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. Acts 13:48-52

Luke's words here indicates that Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch in Pisidia for an extended time, probably several weeks, during which the gospel went out into all the region around. This wondrous, powerful Word of God - the glorious gospel of God's grace in Christ, which relieves the heavy weight of human guilt - was changing hearts. But many of the Jews were disturbed by this, and, as they could not prevail openly, they went around behind scenes and stirred up people of high standing - and through them they reached the Roman authorities and thus drove them out of their district.

The last verse is beautiful. The disciples who remained in this area *"were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit."* There is no mention of tongues with the filling of the Holy Spirit, but there is mention of the fruit of the Spirit. They were filled with the joy of the Lord and the love of God. This is the great sign of the Spirit of God in the human heart -- it floods the heart with love and joy. If we are truly Christians our hearts cannot help but be moved at the grace of God toward us, who deserve nothing from God.

"The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit." The example of that response is an important one to follow. It is quite common to have conflict and opposition and even persecution of some sort arise just at the time that things appeared to be great. Paul and Barnabas saw multitudes of Gentiles turning to the Lord and spreading the gospel word throughout the region. That certainly was a reason to be filled with joy, but they were also filled with joy and the Holy Spirit when conflict, opposition and persecution arose and affected them directly. We have seen similar things in the life of this church. We have had good seasons when we were beginning to make an impact for Christ in our community – and suddenly conflict or opposition, whether external or internal, enters in and deflects us away from our main business of passionately proclaiming the glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people. And sadly the earliest casualty in all of this is usually our joy and our relationships with one another.

But in our text we read that in the midst conflict, opposition and persecution *"The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit."* What God is telling us here today is that it is our relationship with Jesus Christ, not our circumstances that should determine our attitudes about the main business of the church. And if our attitudes about the main business of the church are right, then our focus and our actions and our relationships with one another will be right to – because we are *"filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit."* The main business of the church is to obey the calling of the Holy Spirit by promoting the glory of God by sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ out in our community and out among all the nations of the world. When the church does seek to focus on the main business of the church, the church will experience conflict and opposition, from within and without. At such times we need to remember the apostle Paul words from 2 Corinthians 10:3-5: *"For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ."* May our weapons of warfare against conflict, opposition and persecution be being filled with the joy of Jesus and filled with the Holy Spirit. Amen?

*The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing. Zephaniah 3:17*