

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Acts tells some of what Christ did soon after returning to heaven and being installed at God's right hand. He had already ordered his people to tell his story; he accompanied it with the Holy Spirit as promised. People were transformed, the church grew, and the opposition was unable to prevent it. In this passage (Acts 13) it tells about Christ sending his messengers into parts of the world that had not heard the gospel.

HOW CHRIST SENDS HIS MESSENGERS

The Holy spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

We are not told how the Holy Spirit said it. It is obvious that the church as a whole (and especially its leadership) understood the Spirit of Christ to be saying this. He had "called" Barnabas and Saul, implying that he made this known to them directly. Both the church and the persons concerned were sure that God was calling them to a special task.

They had different tasks. Barnabas and Saul were to do whatever the Spirit would tell them. The task of the church was to release them from other duties and send them out on their new work.

The particular task was not revealed at that stage. It was just, "the work to which I have called them." That may remind us of Abram. The Lord called him out of Ur but did not tell him at that stage where he was to go. This calls for faith in the God who calls his people. Church work is not a career but a calling, so Christ's direct activity is to be expected.

All this happened in connection with the life of the cosmopolitan church at Antioch. Those referred to as "prophets and teachers" were engaged in worship and fasting, perhaps along with the rest of the church. They are mentioned as the spiritual leaders of the church who would take initiative and make the decisions. Fasting is mentioned in Scripture as a time when people focus on seeking the Lord, perhaps for guidance or in connection with some spiritual venture. That is when Christ made his will known. When the church formally set apart the two men they also engaged in prayer and fasting.

All this has relevance to churches today. Christ receives from the Father his gifts to carry out the work of his kingdom. The Spirit equips people for certain tasks (See Ephesians 4); Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12). He may also lay it on a person's heart to become involved, whether in evangelistic or pastoral work, or in the material and social care of needy persons. If this is the Spirit's call he will make it obvious to the church that this individual is equipped for this necessary task. When the judgement of the individual and the church coincide we may take it that Christ is leading by his Spirit's influence. The appointment of a person to office in the church is (or should be) initiated by the Holy Spirit, and his blessing should be sought, as it was in their prayer and fasting.

CHRIST IS THE MESSAGE

The old prophets pointed people away from themselves to God, but Christ drew people's attention to himself. So the message he sends is the message about himself. Christianity is Christ.

There is an example recorded in verses 13-41 of the message Barnabas and Saul gave. The audience was Jewish (they met in a synagogue) and the message was presented in a way Jewish people could relate to. Saul (whom the writer now refers to by his Roman name of Paul) used the Jews' history and Law to put his message across. He related the history of the people using the familiar theme of leadership that waited for the Messiah. When Paul came to King David he jumped straight to Jesus of Nazareth as the promised descendant of David, who would be the Messiah God had long spoken of. He argued that prophecy had been fulfilled in that Jesus had been unjustly killed. The good news was that God had also raised him from the dead, never to die again ("the sure mercies of David"). Therefore there is now forgiveness of sins in his name. If we receive him we can never again be condemned for our sins by the Law of God (that had been a great burden on Jewish consciences).

The point of the message was that we can be forgiven. That has profound practical implications for it forces us to make a choice. We can believe in Jesus as the Christ, and be forgiven; or we can make light of the message and be condemned for our sins. Although Paul's message was tailored for a Jewish audience it is for us also. And the way he expressed it is significant. Christianity is not just a set of ideas; it is rooted in real life – Jesus was the fulfilment of God's age-old promises. Christianity carries weight because it shows the Bible has a unique credibility – detailed predictions made thousands of years before the event have been fulfilled. Although the Law given through Moses never applied to us we recognise its moral elements in the way our conscience operates – and forgiveness is a key human need. A life of blessing hinges on finding God's forgiveness – everything else follows on from that, and that depends on receiving the Christ of the gospel.

THE EFFECTS OF CHRIST'S MESSAGE

The gospel message Paul brought resonated with many of the people. They "begged" that the same message would be given again the following Sabbath. The gospel of Christ Jesus meets our deepest human needs. It is not surprising people respond to it. The following Sabbath almost the entire city had turned out! The message had created such interest that people talked about it, the rumour spread, and most folk wanted to hear it for themselves. Churches in the West are so accustomed to having minimal impact they are tempted to think it will always be like that; in fact, the gospel can be welcomed by the majority of a community.

But some opposed it. Their hostility was so vehement that Barnabas and Paul had no option but to leave them. As they did so they reminded their antagonists that Christ was destined to be "a light for the Gentiles" (Isaiah 49:6). It was a rebuke to their ignorance of their own scriptures, and a slap in the face for people who identified religion with race. There are people in various churches who have no time for Christ but are proud of their denominational label; they will perish while many they despise will be welcomed into heaven.

Others obtained mercy. Those people rejected it. Paul refers to them as "judging yourselves unworthy of eternal life". Salvation is God's gift (to be welcomed by any); damnation is what we choose for ourselves.

Those initial responses to the gospel developed as time went on. Luke says there was great joy in that city, and the gospel spread far and wide. Where there is the joy of the Lord people will tell and others will be attracted. But the enemies of the gospel slandered both it and its messengers. They incited the ruling class to attack the missionaries. And Barnabas and Paul had to leave.

Christ did not leave. The story ends with those telling words, “The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.”