

The Conflict of Intellect and Religion

Acts 13:6-12

Acts 13

¹ Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.

⁴ So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵ And when they arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. They also had John as their assistant.

⁶ Now when they had gone through the island to Paphos, they found **a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew** whose name was Bar-Jesus, ⁷ who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man. This man called for Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.

⁸ But Elymas the sorcerer (for so his name is translated) withstood them, **seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.** ⁹ Then Saul, who also is called Paul, **filled with the Holy Spirit**, looked intently at him ¹⁰ and said, "O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord? ¹¹ And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time." And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand.

¹² **Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord.**

As we have now spent some time in the book of Acts on our Sunday morning studies, several weeks ago we covered chapter 10-11, where a Gentile, a Roman Centurion by the name of Cornelius, as well as his household and many friends and family had come to know Jesus Christ as their Savior through the teaching of the **Apostle Peter**.

I shared with you that this event – the conversion of a Gentile with major influence in his family and community – was a pivot point. A pivot point, moving us to the overall ministry of the Gospel as it turned from being primarily focused on the Jews, to very

soon being focused primarily towards the Gentiles. Chapters 10-11 were just the pivot point, the fullness of the turn hasn't quite taken place... yet!

We are now in chapter 13 and the beginning of this chapter was covered a couple of weeks ago. I felt the Lord calling me to present it as a **Call to Missions, "Are You on Mission?"**, and encouraging you to consider what the Mission is that God has placed on your life as an individual. Each one of us has purpose and a direction or **mission** the Lord would have us fulfill during our time here on earth.

We spoke about how the Holy Spirit had called for Barnabus and Saul to be set apart for a special task the Lord had for them; how the Church leadership in Antioch *"having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, (then) they sent them away (13:3)."*

And how *"they also had John (Mark) as their assistant (13:5)."*

Verse 4-5 tells us that as they left Antioch in Syria, they first traveled to the coastal city of Seleucia and there boarded a ship to sail to the island Cyprus, about 75 miles out in the Mediterranean Sea, off the coast of Syria/Lebanon. Cyprus was the home country of Barnabus. Luke tells us that as they landed in the city of *"Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews (13:5)."*

Nothing is stated as far as the response to their preaching in Salamis. We don't know if their message was accepted or rejected; rather there were a few, many, or no converts. Salamis seemed to be a point in the progress of their journey as they headed for the city of Paphos, on the other side of the island. As the bird flies, it is about 88 miles from Salamis to Paphos, but due to the mountainous regions of the entire island it is a land travel journey of over 120 miles, taking the better part of a week traveling by foot. And as the Missionary Team arrived at the city of Paphos, they had opportunity to share, but they also met with opposition to the message of the Gospel.

At this time in the First Century, Paphos was the capital of Cyprus and was the home of the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus, and Luke tells us he was *an intelligent man*. But the problem was, he had in his company a man by the name of Bar-Jesus (or son of Jesus or Joshua). Bar Jesus, was also called Elymas, which can be translated as

magician, sorcerer, wizard, or even doctor. As a matter of fact, **this is also the same Arabic word** we read in the Gospel account of Matthew: *magos* (*mag'-os*), where it is translated as Magi – or Wise Man. And we know historically that the Magi or Wise Men of Matthew's Gospel weren't evil and wicked men. They certainly weren't considered to be demon possessed. They were simply men of high intellect, extraordinarily well-read, and students of many religions, and the sciences, including astronomy.

With that in mind, as I read this passage I feel this could have been the very position Bar-Jesus had in the court of Sergius Paulus, as a trusted counselor on a variety of many things.

And yes, I fully understand that Luke says he is a *false prophet*. And we will get into that in a bit.

But when the Missionary team arrived, Sergius, the proconsul “...*sought to hear the word of God* (3:7).” He wanted to hear the truth of the Gospel, “*But Elymas the magos* (*mag'-os*) *withstood them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith* (3:8).”

Bear in mind that since Luke is very clear in telling us that Bar-Jesus or Elymas was a Jew, it would do us good to remember that the Jews, by and large stayed away from those things which might be considered magic or sorcery, and in particular direct, purposeful demonic activity – it would have been too close to idolatry. But since many of the translations translate *magos* (*mag'-os*) as “*a sorcerer*”, it seems as though they take their reference from Paul's bold declaration to him found in verse 10, as he calls Elymas a “*son of the devil*” and “*enemy of all righteousness*”.

Yet, we also see in the Gospel accounts where Jesus, in dealing with the Jewish leaders who attacked Him and the message of the Gospel: He tells these Jewish leaders, “*You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do* (John 8:44).”

In addition to that, in the Apostle John's first epistle, in chapter 3 he writes

1 John 3

⁸ *He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.*

¹⁰ *In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.*

What I'm trying to say here is, you don't have to be into black magic or sorcery to be a "son of the devil" and "enemy of all righteousness". As a matter of fact, you can be **very intelligent**, as well as **very religious** and still be a great tool of the enemy. Because **any opposition of the fullness of the truth of the Gospel message is playing right into the hands of Satan himself.**

And, even today there are many (*even within the structure of what we call the Church*) who are being used by the devil, because they have believed in and stand more for the idea of man's intellectual knowledge, over having faith in the a) Word, b) Work, and c) Hand of God. When man makes effort to take God and/or His Word out of the picture, and in particular when that individual or group becomes a stumbling block to those who would come to faith in Christ, they fully become an "enemy of all righteousness" and set themselves up as "sons of the devil". And as his sons, they are very busy being about their father's evil business.

Whenever we as individuals or as a group, through our human intellect and reasoning:

- Try to rationalize our sin,
- Minimize the perversity of the culture,
- Dismiss the need for man to repent,
- Make light of the consequences of God's coming judgment,
- Disregard the need for the cross and the sacrifice of Jesus,
- Contradict the effects of His *amazing grace*,
- Play down the miraculous, and
- Give physical explanation of that which is obviously supernatural;

We become the “*enemy of all righteousness*” and we set ourselves up as a “*children of the devil*”.

We see that so strongly today as those who profess to be spokesmen and women for the Lord fail to warn of God’s coming judgment;

We see it in denominational movements that have left the eternal truths of God’s Word in order to appease the culture;

We see it in church leadership who feel they need to vote on the validity of God’s truth and order, simply because the standards of society have changed;

We see this in churches who no longer preach the reality of sin and the need for personal repentance;

We see this in pulpits as men have sold themselves out to the lies of the enemy in order to be people pleasers, rather than lovers of God;

Some of us had the opportunity to view the film “*The Moses Controversy*” by Thinking Man Films the other evening. One of the things that came to me over and over in this film is the number of Theologians, Scientists, Archeologists, and others who at one time had the training and teaching of Evangelical Churches, even accepting the Bible as the Truth of God. But as they progressed on in their education, in their intellect **they lost sight of the miraculous**; they **forgot about the supernatural**. In their wisdom they became as fools.

You need to connect with the fact that the Apostle Paul was a well-educated man of his day, one who excelled above his peers, able to debate the great thinkers of his day on Mars Hill. Later on in his ministry he will tell the Church at Corinth that –

1 Corinth 2

¹ And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. ² For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. ³ I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. ⁴ And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human

wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

⁶ However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing.

⁷ But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory....,

And a little later in the same book he writes –

1 Corinthians 3

¹⁸ Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their own craftiness"; ²⁰ and again, "The LORD knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile."

Please understand, Paul had nothing against higher education and neither do I. I praise God that we have those who are highly educated. But the problem comes **when our education replaces or does away with our life of faith**. It's at that point when our education is now a detriment to the purposes for which God has created us.

As a Jew and as the counselor to the proconsul, Elymas had an honorable position. A position that would have allowed him to speak into the life of Sergius Paulus the truth of the great God of Israel. But Elymas valued his position over truth; natural wisdom over the supernatural working of God.

And Paul recognized the wickedness of Elymas' actions. Paul recognized fully that the enemy of all men's souls was using Elymas, an educated, religious man of influence "*...to turn the proconsul away from the faith.*" He wanted to block Sergius Paulus from his ability to grasp the hope of the Gospel as it began to penetrate his heart.

And so, the Holy Spirit moved Paul to actions and words.

⁹ Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him ¹⁰ and said, "O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord? ¹¹ And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time." And immediately

a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand.

Just a quick side note here: “*Saul, who also is called Paul...*” This is actually the last time we read that the Apostle is referred to as Saul (outside of a couple of times where he, himself is speaking about his conversion experience on the Road to Damascus). We are also going to find out in the next portion of scripture that it is now Paul who takes the lead in the missionary journey (verse 13 speaks of “*Paul and his party*”).

But here, the Holy Spirit moves upon the Apostle Paul, **as he pronounces a curse** upon Elymas **for standing in defiance to the Gospel.**

Now, be careful here. It was the *Holy Spirit moving upon Paul*, not just Paul’s *frustration with opposition*. If we don’t understand how the Holy Spirit had a specific purpose on that day and on that time, to lead this particular Believer, to speak these particular words, there’s too many of us that would take this event and whenever we had a conflict in the presentation of the Gospel or even in our lives, we would be yelling out:

*“You son of the devil, you perverter of the truth.
May God blind your physical eyes right now and
cause you to walk in the same physical darkness
that you walk in spiritually!”*

Oh be careful little flock, all too often we can so easily grab for a handful of rocks and proceed to stone people with our own **righteous indignation**, can’t we?

But here, Paul was *moved by the Spirit of God*, not by the frustration of his emotions. I for one, am very glad that Luke makes that very clear. Even as the Holy Spirit sent blindness on Elymas, still it was **for a temporary time**—

¹¹ *...not seeing the sun for a time.” And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand.*

And, it was all for **a particular reason**—

¹² *Then **the proconsul believed**, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord.*

Understand also, it wasn't just because Sergius Paulus saw Elymas stricken with blindness... I mean I'm sure that **definitely caught his attention** and drew him to a quicker acceptance of the Gospel, but Luke is very clear in telling us that *the proconsul believed..., **being astonished** at the teaching of the Lord.*

If there's anything I want to make abundantly clear today, it's the fact that it is the honesty of the straight forward teaching, preaching, or personal presentation of the full counsel of God's Holy Word that opens people's eyes up to the hope of the Gospel.

We dare not water it down to make it more palatable, we cannot soft sell it to make it more appealing, and we dare not change it or pervert it to fit into the current social behaviors.

Man naturally moves towards sin. We cannot change the Word to fit man. Man must repent and come to a knowledge of the truth..., the One Truth..., the eternal truth of God's redemptive plan found by grace through faith in the completed work of Jesus Christ who suffered and died for the sin of all mankind.

Jesus didn't give Himself as a sacrifice in order that we could live however we wanted, and change the Words of the Bible to fit our own personal lifestyles. His sacrifice allows us **to actually die to ourselves** and the ways of this world and be born again as a part of the eternal Kingdom of God.

No, I don't believe that Elymas was a sorcerer with a ***magic wand, a pointy hat and incantations***. But, neither do I believe that he was demon possessed in the normal sense of what we see in the Gospel accounts and in the book of Acts.

Oh yes, **he was absolutely used by the devil**, just as any man or woman can be used by the devil to block the message of the Gospel.

But more than anything, I believe Elymas was an individual who worked hard at finding a place of comfort in this present world without paying heed to the next. And to reassure

himself in his own folly, he did all he could to keep others from coming to a knowledge of the truth.

We don't know what happened to Elymas after this. Did he lose his job as a counselor to the proconsul? I imagine he probably did.

Did he, perhaps come to a true saving faith in Jesus after this event? I would love to think that he did.

The interesting thing is that God didn't strike him dead at that moment, and neither was his physical blindness permanent. Perhaps, even like Paul himself, during his blindness Elymas began to see clearer than he had ever seen in his life. Once again, I would love to think that he did.

Perhaps someday in heaven we'll get to meet a man who in this life was a religious intellectual, who knew nothing about God until he was made blind and forced to look beyond himself to see the truth of the crucified Christ...

Blessed Redeemer, precious Redeemer
Seems now I see Him on Calvary's tree
Wounded and bleeding, for sinners pleading
(I was) Blind and unheeding, (yet, He was) dying for me.¹

You cannot trust in either religion, nor in intellect. You can excel in both, yet completely miss the Savior.

¹ Avis B. Christiansen, "Blessed Redeemer" (1920)