The Early Church: Challenges, Sacrifices and Problems

Part Four: Beautiful Feet

This is part four in a series of studies in the ‘Acts of the Apostles,’ looking at challenges and problems the early church faced: challenges to their thinking; sacrifices they made to maintain their faith; problems they encountered because of their commitment to the gospel of Jesus. Along the way we consider what that, says to us.

One note: these studies aren’t necessarily to be completed in one go. Take as long as you like, answer as many questions as you like. But the main point is, talk about it.

**Overall text: Acts 13 verses 1 to 12**

**Opener:** Do you talk to your pet, or hear people talk to their pets? ‘Sit down, fluffy. What have you done, Fang? Do you want a biscuit or a bone?’ Does their pet understands?

**Question: How do we know if other species understand our speech?**

In the film ‘Close Encounters of the Third Kind’, they needed to find a universal language in order to communicate with an alien species,. The universal language they chose was music. In the film ‘Contact’, mathematics is that universal language.

That’s a way to understand what the early church experienced. It’s not just one group willing to get along with another. Early Judaism had a definition of holiness that kept them separate. Their religious drive was doing whatever they could to stay away from Gentiles. Their traditions, codes, dress, said, ‘We cannot get close to you if you’re not one of us.’

Of all the religions, for God to take that group and say, ‘I want to teach you how to call anyone else brother and sister,’ was huge.

**Imagine: You move abroad, to an alien culture so different and difficult to understand? How does it feel? What would you do to feel more comfortable?**

The church in Antioch was the first to intentionally reach out to the Gentiles. They were first to say, ‘If the gospel is for all, and we can be brother and sister together, it’s time to do this. Let’s create this multi-ethnic, multi-national family of faith.’ So, one reason the church grew was because they learned a language all could speak.

**Question: Are there any other reasons why the early church grew so rapidly?**

Jesus said,

‘You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand. In the same way, let your light shine, that they may see your good deeds.’

These good deeds Jesus mentions seem to be proactive acts of compassion for others. Letting our light shine is not just ‘Living such a holy life that others will say, “What makes you different? I want to be like you.”’ Jesus says our GOOD deeds, not just the absence of BAD deeds, is the primary sign of God working.

In the early church, that becomes the universal language. It’s that kind of activity that unbelievers saw and say, ‘I don’t know about your message, or your God, but when I see you doing that, you get my attention.’ Compassionate acts. The early church spread quickly, because Christians were known for this.

**Question: Can you see any danger in saying that our good deeds are the primary sign of God working? (think first, then see note #1 at end)**

Of course, there’s a message to share. We’re not just a compassion agency. We are to LIVE the gospel and PROCLAIM the gospel. Paul says, in Romans,

‘Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. But how can they call if they do not hear.’ That is why scripture says, ‘How beautiful are the feet of the messengers that bring good news.’

You become a work of beauty when you are committed to getting the message out. The Antioch church demonstrates this. Acts 12 shows us their amazing compassion. Yet, they also know and share the message that transforms lives. It’s about doing both. Some churches say, ‘We only need to save souls!’ Others say, ‘It’s just about being compassionate and loving.’ Yet it seems to be both. This is our challenge.

## Verse Study, Part One

**Read: Acts 13 verses 1 to 3**

Acts 13 verse 1:

**In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers…**

**Question: Do you see any difference between prophets and teachers?**

Both prophets and teachers work together to communicate good news.

**Teachers** communicate the steady truth of scripture. They would, in the 1st century, have two sources. Their scriptures were Jewish scripture, what we call the Old Testament. But early church teachers then overlaid that with the teaching of Jesus. Remember, this teaching is less than 20-years old, passed on through oral tradition. So a good teacher would not only know the Old Testament, but also the teaching not yet written down. The apostles are still alive, and are making sure the communities hear the stories of Jesus.

That’s why, when the stories are later written down, it’s no problem. People may ask, ‘How can we know those stories are trustworthy?’ But they were written down and given to churches who already knew the stories, checked and affirmed by people who lived through them. If they were radically changed, they would have said, ‘This isn’t right.’ An unbroken retelling. The written versions just affirmed what they already knew.

**Prophets**, then, would apply that, through what the Spirit would say to a given church. Prophets said, ‘God’s will for this church is this.’

**Exercise: Pick one of the teachings of Jesus - a parable or instruction - and see if, between you, you can retell it accurately. Then check how close you are.**

…Barnabas, Simeon called Niger…

Niger means ‘black’. It suggests that Simeon came from Africa. This implies that the church already had diversity; not just in the membership, but, at leadership level.

…Lucius of Cyrene…

Cyrene is in Northern Africa. So Lucius is apparently African. They may have heard the gospel through missionary work and came to Antioch because it was a trading city.

…Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch)…

When a tetrarch or king was raised as a child in court, their friends were selected for them. Certain families would donate their sons of the same age, so that the child would be raised with trusted friends. Manaen was selected for that with Herod.

This explains something. When Luke writes, ‘Herod said this,’ or ‘Herod did that,’ how did he know? This may be how. Luke met these people in order to research and write Acts. People from different segments of society brought their stories with them.

…and Saul.

This is Paul. Notice, he’s still known as Saul up until this point.

**Question: Consider your church, or circle of Christian friends. Is there diversity? If so, why is diversity there? If not, why is it absent - any external circumstances?**

Verse 2:

‘While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting…’

The Greek used for ‘worshipping’ literally means ‘serving’, or ‘ministering.’ They are serving God in their worship.

**Question: What does it mean to serve God?**

Here it seems to be partnered with prayer, as if prayer is a way of serving. Prayer is not just about getting what we want. Prayer is investing in relationship with God, face-to-face time with the one we say we love.

‘…the Holy Spirit said…’

How did the Holy Spirit speak? It could have been shared intuition, or through the prophets.

**Question: Does the Holy Spirit speak in any other way?**

“Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

The Greek word for ‘set apart’ can be translated ‘separate.’ When Paul was called by Jesus in Acts 9, he was set apart as apostle to Gentiles. Notice he hasn’t yet done that. He’s been in Antioch, with both Jews and Gentiles. Learning. Teaching. Discipling. Imagine having the Apostle Paul as your teacher. The insight, guidance on how to live the gospel. But now Paul must be sent for intentional missionary work. The church has to let go. No doubt they wanted to keep him and Barnabas. But a larger work had to be done.

**Reflection: Think of your church. Can you name people who appear to be indispensable to the church? What if God told the church to give them up, send them on to other work? How would your church feel?**

Verse 3:

After they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

The church doesn’t hesitate: ’If it’s good for the kingdom, were behind it.’

**Review verses 1 to 3. Has anything surprised you?**

## Verse Study, Part Two

**Read: Acts 13 verses 4 to 12**

Verse 4:

The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus.

Notice this says they were sent by the Holy Spirit, even though verse 3 says the church sent them. It’s the same. The Holy Spirit works through people, collectively as the church. Christians together make up the temple of the Spirit. So the Spirit is present and working, coming out in the church making decisions; doing their best for the advance of the gospel. That’s evidence of the Spirit.

Verse 5:

When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.

**Question: What do you think is meant by ‘the word of God’? (think first, then see note #2 at end)**

Verse 6:

They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus…

Bar-Jesus means ‘son of Jesus.’ Perhaps he was pretending: ‘I’m a child of Jesus as well,’ masquerading as a Christian to capitalise on its popularity. Or it could mean his father’s name was Jesus (Yeshua). Yeshua (or Joshua) was a common name.

**Question: He was a Jewish sorcerer. What’s wrong with that? (think first, then see note #3 at end)**

The word for sorcerer is ‘Magi.’ This seems to imply that he’s bad because he’s a Magi. Yet, in the Christmas story the Magi are good. Why? It’s all about trajectory. In other words, to be a Magi is not a good thing in scripture. But, if you are a pagan, raised with this, and know no better, but are seeking truth, God says, ‘You may be into astrology, but I love your heart. I’ll meet you there and send you a star.’ Even though astrology was forbidden, God met them there and drew them to Jesus. God will find you wherever you are. He won’t condemn you, as long as you are open to finding Jesus.

But, a Jew, heading towards astrology, sorcery, to tap into some power, is heading away from God. So, it’s not enough to look at where people are in life, and say, ‘You’re bad, you’re good.’ We have to know where they’re coming from, where they’re going.

Verse 7:

…an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus.

Sergius Paulus seems to be one of the first Roman officials to see the truth of the gospel.

The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God.

He wants to know what’s being taught.

Verse 8:

But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith.

Imagine what’s riding on this. He is spiritual adviser to the most powerful man on Cyprus, and some people come saying, ‘This is wrong.’

**Question: Why would Elymas the sorcerer oppose them? (think first, then see note #4 at end)**

Verses 9 to 11:

Then Saul, who was also called Paul…

Notice that, where the church is, for the first time, intentional about taking the gospel to the Gentiles, Saul’s name changes to Paul. Saul was his Jewish name. Paul is a Roman name. So he gives up his Jewish identity in order to reach these people. ‘I follow Jesus. Compared to that, my ethnic identity is unimportant.’

Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, “You are a child of the devil…”

Notice, not a child of Jesus, not Bar-Jesus after all.

“…and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun.” Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand.’

This Magus is being completely rejected. His heart was not to find the Messiah. Instead it was to obscure the truth and make sure others don’t find him. That’s why he is rebuked.

**Question: The Magus was blind for a time. Who else did that happen to, to make him slow down and think about his life? (think first, then see note #5 at end)**

Verse 12:

When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

Why did he believe? Because he was amazed at the TEACHING about the Lord. Consider the difference between miracles and message. Miracles give evidence of truth, and attract attention to the message. But, people need to believe because of the MESSAGE, not because they’re into miracles, blessings or power. If people become Christian because they want power to use, that’s narcissistic.

People sometimes become Christians because they heard that’s the way to prosperity, to blessing. Then, when they go through suffering, they feel ripped off. ‘I tapped into you because you’re meant to make my life wonderful. Instead I’m suffering for the cause.’ Faith should never be rooted in the miraculous instead of in the gospel message.

**What does this teach us? Discuss these:**

**One:** This Antioch church was diverse. They went and found all kinds of people. It’s not as if the mission to the Jews was exhausted. They could have just found their own kinds of people and stayed in their comfort zone.

Churches are tempted to think, ‘The best thing is to get together with people who are just like us.’ Then we create subgroups for people like us: divorce groups, singles groups, young mothers groups, mens groups, and so on. We subdivide because we think people will grow better together with people who are just like them.

There’s nothing wrong with small groups. But, we shouldn’t just be comfortable. Our challenge is to push against that and say, ‘We need to learn how others experience God differently, how people from different areas and backgrounds see Jesus differently, how to think in different ways, learn from one another.’ Make friends with people from different age groups, the opposite sex, different backgrounds and values; understand them and see how enriching that can be. That’s the diversity of the body of Christ.

**Two:** This early church discerned God’s will when it came together. We are so used to being individuals; but this shows us that we discern God’s will best when we come together. Discernment through community is the normal way of listening to God in the New Testament church. Not privately and alone.

**Three:** This early church is willing to let go of what is great for them, for the good of the kingdom. They left their comfort zone, to help the gospel go forward. Maybe in our situation, things need to change in order to help others hear the gospel, even if we feel uncomfortable.

**Four:** Are your feet beautiful? That’s when we learn compassionate service to others, partnered with a commitment to communicate the message. It’s no good saying, ‘I’m good at speaking the message, so I don’t have to be nice.’ It’s also no good saying, ‘I’m embarrassed about speaking the message, so I’ll just live a compassionate life.’ Christians are called to learn this message, have it transform our lives, and communicate it to others, in our own way. Compassion and witness. Good deeds with the gospel. That’s the challenge for each of us.

***Note #1:*** *One danger may be that the motivation for doing good deeds can be simply to puff up our own self-importance, rather than the good deeds being an outflowing of God working. In other words, we become do-gooders simply to make ourselves look good.*

***Note #2:*** *Throughout the New Testament, the word of God means the gospel message. If we just see the bible in general as the word of God, the downside is we see any bible study as grasping the word of God. But the Pharisees did that and missed the word of God. The word of God here is carrying the gospel message, with its power and clarity, to those who need to hear.*

***Note #3:*** *‘Jewish sorcerer’ is an oxymoron. He should have known better. Jews knew, through scripture, that they were not to turn to divination of any sort to find their guidance. God, Torah, was enough.*

***Note #4:*** *Elymas could lose his position. He’s got a lot invested in making sure the proconsul doesn’t turn to the faith.*

***Note #5:*** *This happened to Paul himself. So Paul seems to give Bar-Jesus the same gift, his Damascus Road experience. Luke, writing this, may be intentionally drawing the parallel. Bar-Jesus is given the opportunity to slow down and think about truth.*