

The Spirit, the Church, and the People of God

12/31/23

Last service with Ben and Brenda

Acts 13:1-4 (CSB)

13 Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, a close friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

² As 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."

³ Then after they had fasted, prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them off.

⁴ So being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

Today we celebrate the call of God.

A. In a few minutes, we will eat fish to the glory of God and thank Ben and Brenda for their time here in Licking.

1. But first, I want to invite us into this passage to see how God has not quit calling people.

2. I also want to show us from scripture the role the community of God plays in the calling of God.

B. When we talk about calling, we often picture it individually.

1. What is God asking ME to do?

2. Where is God equipping ME to serve?

3. Where is God leading ME?

C. But the calling of God is discovered not only individually with times of personal prayer and fasting but also corporately within the community of God.

1. Your Church family may be more important than you realize.
2. Using Paul, Barnabas, and Ben as examples, I want to show you this relationship between the Spirit, the Church, and the People of God.

1. The passage begins with the church in Antioch.

A. This church was very influential in the early days of Christianity.

1. Antioch is in the far southern tip of modern-day Turkey.
2. It is 300 miles north of Jerusalem and served as the center of the early Gentile Church.
3. After Jerusalem, it became this hub of missional activity.
4. This is where Paul and Barnabas find themselves in their early ministry.

B. Notice that Acts calls this group of people the church.

1. The word "church" means a gathering of people for a purpose.
2. Even though it wasn't at first used to describe a gathering of Christians, it soon referred strictly to a group of people gathered together for the express purpose of worshipping Jesus.

C. Although the church looks different today than it did in Acts 13, I want to express to you the importance of every community, neighborhood, village, and city having groups of believers who gather regularly in Jesus' name.

1. What we do every week on the Lord's Day is not trivial or optional.
2. The gathering of saints and believers is an essential part of Christianity that Jesus uses.
3. This is why we give to missions and hear missionary speakers.

4. This is why we bless people to go and serve as we did with Brandon and Kenzie Weddle and now Ben and Brenda Wolf.

5. Every community must have access to a Bible-believing church.

6. And no, there are not too many churches.

a. There may be too many ineffective churches.

b. But there are not too many churches, even here in the Bible Belt.

D. I know the Church isn't perfect, including this one.

1. There are sinners here.

2. There are addicts here.

3. There are people struggling in their marriages, their finances, and life here.

a. Not everyone who attends will become your life-long friend.

b. Not everyone who comes through these doors has it all together.

c. Every single one of us is in the middle of our sanctification.

4. It has ALWAYS been this way, as Scripture shows us.

a. The letters to the Corinthians perfectly demonstrate that the Church has never been perfect.

b. Remember, the only thing perfect is Jesus.

5. The people's imperfection is not a reason to stop gathering with other believers.

2. What was the Church doing?

A. There was the ministry of prophets and teachers.

1. Very simply, Prophesying tells me that they were receiving insight and direction from the Lord through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.
2. We don't know much about what the Lord was saying through the ministry of prophecy at Antioch.
 - a. But we do know that the Lord was speaking, and the people were listening.
 - b. Remember, the New Testament prophets were ordinary people like us.
 - c. They were not perfect, sometimes they got it wrong (which is what much of Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians is about), and I'm sure it got uncomfortable at times.
3. But the people were engaged with God to a degree that makes many of us uncomfortable.
 - a. One of the things I love about this church is you all seem to thrive when I preach uncomfortable, blue jean, sermons.
 - b. I love that, and I hope that does not change.
 - c. But I long for the day when there is a holy nervousness about entering into worship, giving in the offering, and praying at the altar.
 - d. I long for the day when we are convinced that all of us will be challenged and changed at each moment of the service.

B. The Church in Antioch was being taught.

1. They were learning, growing, and being disciplined by those with gifts of teaching.
2. Spiritual gifts, like prophecy, are dangerous when people are not teachable.
3. But the church in Antioch was a place where teaching and growing could happen.

C. The Church was Fasting and Worshipping.

1. Worshipping is surely connected to both prayer and singing.
 - a. The Church has always prayed and sang together.
 - b. And they didn't pray silently to themselves but prayed aloud.
 - c. Prayer and singing were community activities.
2. They were also fasting.
 - a. They could have been fasting till sundown.
 - b. They could have been engaged in fasting two days a week.
 - c. They might have been fasting food for a longer period of time.
 - d. And even though there are times when we are to fast and not brag about it, fasting here was a church-wide community event.
3. It is significant that we see that one of the earliest forms of worship for Christians included fasting.
 - a. Fasting is the withholding of food and sometimes water for the purpose of dedicating time, energy, and discomfort to prayer and worship.
 1. A similar practice of married couples abstaining from sex for a short time is similar but not called fasting.
 2. Also, I submit to you that the popular "Daniel Fast" is misleading because Daniel wasn't fasting; it was his normal diet.
 3. We might call abstaining from media, TV, or other things "fasting," but biblically, fasting is always food and water.

- b. Furthermore, there is no speed fasting.
- c. Fasting is the prolonged denial of earthly bread so that we might develop an appetite for the Bread of Life.
- d. "Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (Deut. 8:3, Matt 4:4).

D. All of this is happening communally.

- 1. They were not isolating themselves but joining themselves with others.
- 2. Together, they were blessing the Lord and building each other up through the ministry of prophecy, teaching, worship, and fasting.
- 3. It was within this context that the Spirit spoke to them about Paul and Barnabas.

3. The Spirit initiated the Call.

A. Paul and Barnabas were already active within the congregation.

- 1. They were already serving, working, and doing ministry.
- 2. In other words, they were known by the believers and had proven faithful and trustworthy.
- 3. Where they were was a good, God-honoring place.

B. But the Spirit set them apart for something different.

- 1. Through the ministry of the body, the prophets, the Spirit said to set them apart.
 - a. I have often read this, thinking it was an audible supernatural voice.
 - b. But it doesn't have to be.
 - c. How does the Lord speak?

d. Does He not speak through the spiritual gifts that He has placed within the community?

2. Likely, while they were gathered, the Lord used one or several of the prophets to say, "Set apart for me, Paul and Barnabas."

a. The people's response was obedience coupled with more prayer and fasting.

b. Perhaps they were confirming the word of the Lord through prayer and fasting.

c. They weren't hesitant, but they also were not rash.

d. They soaked themselves, Paul and Barnabas, in prayer and fasting, for what God was calling them to was too important.

C. Good advice here: Before making decisions, have you prayed?

1. And not 30-second prayers.

2. Do you sense something coming up?

3. If so, have you fasted?

4. Because the time to fast is BEFORE you have to make a decision.

a. Sometimes, we try to delegate this by asking others what we should do.

b. We haven't been praying, fasting, or worshipping, so we go to someone who has and hope they get a word for us.

c. But this is not healthy.

d. The WHOLE body shares in the responsibility to be spiritually ready for the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

D. I love how the whole community, not just the leaders, was involved in the prayer and fasting.

1. Can I suggest to you that this is something ALL of us can do better?

- a. What could happen if we ALL spent time each week in specific prayer and fasting?
- b. Not just in the building but throughout the week.
- c. Starting tomorrow night, we will meet for prayer from 630 till about 730, Monday-Wednesday.
- d. What if you decided now to attend as many of these prayer nights as possible?
- e. What if you decided not to eat anything until AFTER the prayer service each night?
- f. What kind of difference would it make if we ALL prayed and fasted?

2. Would we make better decisions?

- a. Would the worship time be more powerful?
- b. Would the preaching have more impact?
- c. Would we know the Lord's will more clearly?

3. It's easy to talk about fasting when we are getting ready to eat fish.

- a. Can I challenge you to try fasting a meal or a day a week?
- b. Can I ask you to pray for Sunday service every Saturday night before you go to bed?

1. If I could ask you to start just one thing in the new year, it would be to pray for me, the church, and yourself EVERY Saturday night in 2024.

2. That's 52 times.

4. Prayer, fasting, and worship were the activities of ALL the Church, not a select few.

4. The sending of Paul and Barnabas was a community event.

A. As the believers in Antioch blessed them, they participated in the future ministry that happened elsewhere.

1. It says they laid hands upon them.
2. This is a sign and symbol of the community blessing upon them.
3. It is a symbol of ordination, that Paul and Barnabas might go within the power of the Lord and the blessing of the people.

B. A calling like Paul and Barnabas' needed a special blessing.

1. They had received a call to devote themselves to the work of the Lord and to leave what had become home.
2. They were to leave all behind and to go wherever the Lord should lead.
3. And as Paul and Barnabas preached, planted churches, healed the sick, and cast out demons, the Church in Antioch was blessed because of them too.
4. And a side note, they didn't break up simply because Paul and Barnabas left.
5. **One of my greatest concerns is that when it is my time to move you, so many of you do the same.**

C. The Call to ministry is a community event.

1. Ben and Brenda believed that they would pastor in this area someday.
2. They probably hadn't imagined it would take 7 years, but it has.
3. And in the meantime, this community of believers has had a shaping function that I believe has prepared them to minister in Norwood.

a. Ben, you weren't ready to pastor a country church when I first met you.

b. But I am firmly convinced that this is the Lord's timing and plan.

c. Today, it seems good to us and the Holy Spirit to send you with our blessing and love to Norwood.

Close: Today, we participate in the call of the Spirit for Ben and Brenda to move to Norwood.

A. I'm proud of them both as they jump fully into this new ministry endeavor.

1. Today, in just a moment, we are going to lay hands upon Ben and Brenda and bless them.

2. **Your kids will be coming back to you in a few minutes.**

B. We are laying hands upon them to express a few things:

1. First, we are recognizing that this move is the will of God.

2. Second, we are expressing that we are giving the Lord from our best.

3. Third, we are expressing excitement that part of the DNA and Culture of Licking A/G will be married to the church at Norwood.