

# Sermon 41, What We Need to Know About Ordination, Acts 13:1-4

**Proposition:** Luke shows that Christ reigns over His church by teaching her — and by telling her to let those teachers go minister to Him elsewhere.

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## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, as a young seminary student struggling with whether I was called to ministry, and as a scholar wondering what the Bible has to say about missions work, I raided this passage over and over. I was looking for a definitive account of how exactly someone knows he should be a pastor, how exactly the church can find and send out missionaries. And to tell you the truth, I was pretty sure I could not find the answers here. Luke's account seemed frustratingly vague, with no information on how the Spirit spoke, no information on how Saul and Barnabas knew where they were called to minister, no information on the qualifications that the Spirit was looking for that made Him decide that those two, and not (say) Manaen and Simeon "Niger", were the ones He was calling, and no information on how the church knew that the Spirit was telling them to send out their missionaries. Though it was frustrating, I kept coming back, trying to figure out how to be certain that somebody — especially me — was the right man for a particular ministry job. And it was only as I was studying this passage for this sermon, and especially as I was reading Guy Waters' commentary, that I realized that I had been asking the wrong questions. Luke's priorities — Jesus' priorities — are not the same as mine were. Brothers and sisters, what I hope to show you is that Luke is indeed telling us what we need to know about ordination. He's not telling us everything we need

to know (I was right about that); that has to be found by comparing Scripture with Scripture and putting together pieces from all over, especially the pastoral epistles. But he is correcting my assumptions and the questions I was asking, and he is highlighting some fundamentally important truths about prophet-teachers and about the church. So rather than looking for certainty about particular individuals, or a roadmap to ministry success, we should be looking at the lessons Luke has for us. They revolve around the place of teachers in the church and how the church obeys the Spirit in unleashing missionaries for service. Christ reigns over His church by teaching her, and by commanding her to unleash her best teachers for service elsewhere.

### **I. Prophet-Teachers**

Luke has shown us so much about the growth and spread of the church — but now, he shows us a tiny glimpse of ongoing life in an ordinary, settled church. In this church, the one that was there in Antioch, were at least five prophet-teachers. Obviously, they spent their time prophesying and teaching the church. Is there any more that we can know based on the names Luke gives them? Well, we know that a prophet is someone who hears from God and is able to give new revelation — truth about God, and information about the future. Thus, of course, we can think of Moses, the greatest prophet of them all. We can think of Isaiah, Elijah, Daniel, and Habakkuk, and the many others who appear throughout the Old Testament. That prophetic gift was renewed in the NT church, at least for a time. You will certainly find that no one claiming prophetic gifts today is writing anything remotely comparable to the book of Micah or the Lamentations of Jeremiah. That's because the prophetic gift in its fullness has passed away. At most, contemporary prophets are given individual facts, "words of knowledge" whose primary impact is psychological, as when Spurgeon said from the pulpit "Someone is here today because she forgot her gloves." That was not a fact that revealed the nature and character of God; that was a fact that had a psychological impact leading to conversion. It demonstrated to the particular woman in question, who had indeed come because she had forgotten her gloves and didn't feel dressed up enough to go to her own church, that Spurgeon really knew God. That is the kind of prophecy that you and I should expect to see in today's church. In other words, it is a gift parallel with the gift of teaching, which endures to today.

In the Antioch church, in the days before the New Testament was written, the Holy Spirit gave the teachers the genuine gift of prophecy. They were able to authoritatively and accurately teach about Jesus without written source material because the Spirit made them true prophets, who spoke by His inspiration.

Nowadays, we should not expect that our teachers will be preserved from error by the authoritative guidance of the Holy Spirit. Rather, they need to study the deposit of truth in the Bible and learn what it says so that they can pass it on to their flocks. As you are well aware, contemporary teachers in the church are perfectly capable of error. In fact, they are seemingly more capable of error than the average church member! And so it is with anyone who has the contemporary reality of the gift of prophecy. Anyone who is a prophet in the church today can err and does err, just as any teacher can err and does err. Anyway, we have the New Testament and thus we are able to mutually check on each other. If you wonder whether something you're

hearing is true, you can reference the Bible and find out. If you're wondering whether some fact that a purported prophet is sharing is true, you can check with the person he's prophesying about and find out whether it's true. And of course, if it is a prophecy about the future, then you can't check it until that future time. But the reality of these prophet-teachers in Antioch tells us that you should no more trust someone who says "I'm a prophet in the church; here's what's going to happen 5 years from now" than you should trust someone who says "I'm a teacher in the church; here's how many angels can dance on the head of a pin," or "here's what room you'll occupy in the Heavenly mansion." That's not how the gift of teaching works and that's not how the gift of prophecy works — anymore.

Anyway, that was the role of the prophet-teacher in the Antioch church. Luke tells us three other important things about these prophet-teachers.

#### **A. Their Place: In the Church, not Over the Church, v. 1**

The first is that they were in the church. Now, when you first read that, it seems pretty basic. Of course they were in the church; why would he report on people who aren't in the church? But when you think about it, he's telling us something: They are not over the church! The fact that someone is a teacher means that he is doing a job within the body, not that he is head over the body. Brothers and sisters, yes, elders govern the church and I think that there is good biblical evidence for our teachers to be serving as elders too. But we teachers are often tempted to unduly exalt ourselves, and you congregants are also tempted to unduly exalt us. I get it. I have been a pew-sitter for the vast majority of my life. I've been pastor of this church for 5.8 years. That means that I was an ordinary lay Christian in the pew for over 80% of my life. I know how it feels to be out there listening to a sermon. I know how tempting it is to reduce the church to the pastor, as though what's really important is who the pastor is — his gifts, his ministry, his work, his sermons, his skill in loving and shepherding the people and all the rest of it. Now, don't get me wrong. Those things are good things and my goal is to be the best at them that I possibly can so as to serve Jesus and serve all of you. But Luke's point is that the pastor is just another church member! Can you imagine having even one pastor as qualified as Barnabas? One theologian-in-residence half as qualified as Paul? This Antioch church is crazy well supplied. It's like having Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin both on your pastoral staff, or like having Abraham Lincoln and George Washington sharing the White House. And yet Luke doesn't tell us that Saul and Barnabas were over the church, that they were running the church, that they were heads of the church in a local sense. That's because they weren't. And the minute I or any teacher arrogates that kind of power, we have left behind the New Testament's message. When we teachers forget that we are in the church to serve the church by teaching, we are not what Barnabas, Saul, and the rest were. We have become wolves, tyrants, usurpers. By the way, this is one reason that we need to beware of the church of Rome. It officially teaches that the church is the clergy. The faithful are nice, but you don't need ordinary people to have the church, because the church is the bishops. And thus, they distinguish between "the teaching church" and "the listening church." Brothers and sisters, those two are the same church! For heaven's sake — where do you think I get the material I teach? I too am part of "the listening church," because I

listen to many commentators, theologians, and philosophers with whom Christ has blessed His church in order to get the material I pass on to you. And the same is true, you know, of popes and archbishops. They have to listen to others to get their material. Luke is simply telling us that the church both teaches and listens, through the appropriate organs within the body. Neither the ear nor the mouth rules the body. Teachers are not the brains of the church; we have one Head and He is the only one over the church. And so don't sit out there, look at me, and think "Wow. That guy is what holds our church together." Nonsense. I am replaceable. Jesus is not. Indeed, this whole passage tells us about how there were five teachers in the church only to tell us that the church unleashed two of them to go do mission work elsewhere!

### **B. Their Provenance: All Over the World, v. 1**

But not only are teachers in the church; teachers are part of the church from all over the world. These five all seem to have been from different places. Right now the world is crazed about diversity. But diversity is not the world's idea; it's God's idea. The world has, as usual, taken one of God's good ideas and blown it so far out of proportion that it has become a monster. The world does this every little bit with different elements of God's moral order. Sometimes it's crazed over honor and allows duelling, because honor is most important. Sometimes it's crazed over equality, and allows homosexuality because complete fungibility between men and women is most important. Sometimes it's all hinked up about order, sometimes about power, sometimes about freedom. Right now it's worried about diversity. But that doesn't undermine the legitimate place diversity has in God's world. God loves diversity. And thus, we should too. Notice that Barnabas is a Levite from Cyprus. Simeon was called "Black." Is this a reference to his skin color? To his cultural mores? Just a random nickname? We don't know, and we can't know. If he was indeed called "black" because of his skin color, one would imagine that such a nickname would only work in a society where black skin was rare. Be that as it may, Lucius is definitely an African, from today's Libya. Manaen is the foster brother or key courtier of Herod the Tetrarch — the one who examined Christ. Isn't that crazy? One of these two adoptive brothers crucifies Christ (or collaborates with Pilate in crucifying Him), and the other is preaching Him to the residents of Antioch. Such is the mystery of election!

Finally, of course, we have Saul, who was from Asia Minor. Thus, we have exactly one teacher of the five who's from the old heartland of Judea; that would be Manaen. The others grew up in Turkey, Libya, Cyprus, and who knows where — because the saving grace of God is going out to all nations, and teachers and prophets within His church come from all nations to bear witness to His salvation. Can you praise God with me for the diversity of teachers and prophets that God was raising up then and that He's raising up now?

### **C. Their Job**

So what was it that these teachers did in the church at Antioch? We presume that they prophesied and taught. But Luke doesn't talk about that here. He highlights two other things.

#### **1. To Minister to God, v. 2**

The first is ministering to God. Luke uses a word used in pagan times to refer to large public acts of religious worship — huge sacrifices and the like. That's what these five teachers were doing.

They were serving, worshipping, performing liturgy — for God. That’s what prophets and teachers are for. We are here to serve God, to do what He wants. We are not here to serve one another, the world, our own felt needs. The church is not here to serve its teachers, as we’ll note momentarily. Rather, the teachers are in the church in order to serve God. Luke doesn’t mention what form that service took, any more than he mentions exactly how John Mark served Paul and Barnabas later in the chapter. After all, if you’re a servant, you are there to serve. You’re not there to say “This isn’t my job. I’m not here to serve in this way!” Nonsense. The whole point of serving is that you do what needs to be done. You help out as you can and where you can. Particularly in ministering to God, you do what He wants, which is to praise, to pray, to obey, to sing, and to join others in doing all of the above.

So the teachers are there ultimately for God’s sake, not for the church’s sake or for their own sake.

## **2. To Go When the Spirit Sends Them, v. 4**

And they need to go where the Spirit sends them. Luke makes that abundantly clear. When the Spirit says “Set apart Barnabas and Saul,” they don’t say “Sorry, Lord. Not me.” Presumably Paul had already learned how far that attitude would get him. And Barnabas was ready to help too.

This is the job of teachers, and really of every Christian. They have to go where the Spirit sends them.

In other words, my younger self needed to learn that more important than how the Spirit signaled His will is the question of whether I’m following what I know about God’s will.

## **II. The Church**

But Luke has many things to teach us about the church, too.

### **A. It Does Not Exist to Serve its Teachers, v. 2**

The first one is that the church does not exist to serve its teacher. The teachers are there to serve God, and the church is there to serve God. The church is not there to serve the teachers! God forbid that a pastor attempt to make the church his personal domain. The size of the church in which I teach is not a verdict on my holiness, my teaching skills, my wisdom, or anything else. The church is not here to validate and serve and worship me. So don’t start! And when you see a church that’s riddled with pastor religion, run! A church that exists to glorify its leader, whether he’s called the pope, the patriarch, or just “pastor” is not a healthy church.

### **B. It Is Where the Spirit Speaks, v. 2**

Second, notice that it is in the church that the Spirit speaks. He spoke, perhaps to the whole church, perhaps only to the prophet-teachers. Luke is not clear about that because the size and composition of the gathering is not important. What’s important is that it is a gathering of the church. When God’s people come together, they can hear Him.

Let me dilate on that theme a little bit. You may have read, in the legends of Paul Bunyan, how he sometimes employed a team of listeners. You see, it’s like this: One man listening can hear a loud call from, say, a mile away. But two men listening can hear a loud call from two miles away. They have twice as much listening power. Or so Paul Bunyan claims.

Now, that's not true in a physical sense. But the core idea is correct in a spiritual sense. The Spirit didn't put a nudge in Paul's heart that only Paul could feel. He put a nudge in the hearts — or the ears — of the whole group, so that they could all say, "Yep, it's Barnabas and Saul." When you hear it from a nudge in your heart, you might be pretty sure. But when the whole church heard it, you can be a lot more sure. And they can be a lot more sure about supporting you.

How does this work? Ah! That is the question that Luke does not care to address.

### **C. It Hears the Spirit while Fasting, v. 2**

Essentially, the only hint he gives us is that the church was fasting. Fasting is an abstention from food for spiritual purposes. You take time away from preparing and eating food (something that occupies a number of hours for most of us each day) and give that time to prayer and worship instead.

Now, this is open to abuse. One can think of the monks who saw lots of visions after they were awake most of the night singing psalms and hadn't had enough to eat in a week. But though most of the visions that appear under such circumstances are more than suspect, Luke is telling us that fasting is a legitimate spiritual exercise. It can increase sensitivity to the Spirit's call. How? We don't know. But we do know that if the church is united in thinking they heard something, and it is something perfectly consistent with what's already in the word, they are most likely right.

So how does the church hear the Spirit? That is not a question Luke is trying to answer. My guess (yes, this is a guess) is that the church is going to hear the Spirit in different ways at different times. The Spirit can speak through words, signs, feelings, and every other created reality to His obedient creatures. What we need to do, particularly when we think the Spirit has something to tell us, is prepare to listen and obey.

### **D. It Obeys the Spirit, v. 3**

Notice how the church obeyed the Spirit. They did four particular things.

#### **1. By Fasting**

The first is that they went back to fasting. The church had already been fasting, for undisclosed reasons. As a matter of fact, the church should be fasting occasionally. We have never had a fast in this congregation. Maybe we just don't need all that much from the Almighty. Or maybe we don't know how much we need. At any rate, this church in Antioch fasted once they heard the Spirit speak.

#### **2. By Prayer**

They also spoke back. They prayed. What did they pray for? Luke doesn't need to say. There is not a magic formula here, any more than there is for fasting. He doesn't tell us how long they fasted; he doesn't tell us the words of their prayer. The point is that you obey the Spirit and His commands by fasting and by praying.

#### **3. By Laying on of Hands**

They also laid their hands on Paul and Barnabas. This refers to ordination; it is a sign of "passing on" the Spirit that rests on the presbyters. Now, Saul and Barnabas were already what we would

consider to be ordained teachers in the church. So why the laying on of hands? Because they were being set apart for a new ministry. Those are the words the Spirit used: “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul.” To set something apart is to reserve it for a special purpose. If you set aside some potatoes, you’re saving them for the part they need to play in the recipe. If you set aside some money, you’re saving it for spending at a later time or on a particular item that you really want. And if you set aside two of the prophet-teachers in your church, you are reserving them for use in an area of need.

#### **4. By Unleashing its top talent for ministry elsewhere**

The biggest test, if I can call it that, of how you read scripture comes right here at the end of the passage. “They sent them away,” reads the NASB. Indeed, every major English translation reads “they sent them off” or “away.” That is weird, because the verb means “let them go.” That’s a little different. The church was not sending them away; the church was releasing them. They unleashed their top talent for ministry elsewhere. It is not the case that the church told them “Go to Cyprus and Asia Minor on our behalf.” Rather, the church said “Okay, you can go.”

I mean, I know I said a few weeks ago that Paul was rather a lot to handle. But can you imagine willingly saying “I’ve had enough”? It’s like telling R.C. Sproul that you want someone else to handle Sunday School for a while. The man’s ability was off the charts! But they let him go, because that’s what the church does.

When the Spirit says “Set them apart for me,” the church says “Yes, Lord.” Brothers and sisters, in sermon after sermon I feel as though I’m leading up to saying “I’m leaving.” I have no plans to leave. I have not been in touch with any other church. I want to spend my life in Gillette. Yet it is unmistakably present in Acts, this trope of the most gifted and loved pastors leaving their church and moving on in response to the Spirit’s call. And the church lets them go!

I said earlier that we have to beware of pastor religion. And so we do. A church that loves her pastor so much that she can’t let him go in response to God’s call is a church that loves her pastor too much. I am not saying that I want to leave; I don’t. But that’s not the point. The point is that when the Spirit calls, we have to obey. The church sometimes has to let a good man go and dive back into the uncertainty of trying to get another one. And the pastor, the prophet-teacher, sometimes has to let a good church go and follow the Spirit’s lead — maybe even to a place that doesn’t have any churches, or to a place where he will not be nearly so comfortable and happy as he was in the church he left.

That’s because the church is not about our comfort. The church does not gather to minister to its pastor; the pastor is not ultimately serving the church. The church and pastor alike are there to serve Christ, and they must do what He commands. When He says “Go,” they go. When He says “Reserve two of your five elders, because I will be using them later,” they reserve them, setting them apart.

So brothers and sisters, we as Christians need to be ready to go in response to the Spirit’s prompting. We as a church need to be ready to let our loved ones go in response to the Spirit’s prompting. Not everyone leaving a church is actually doing so at the Spirit’s command. Fine. Sure. We get that. But when people leave for another church, another place, another ministry, we

need to release them. It's hard when people leave, even when they're leaving for a noble, Spirit-commanded task. But a healthy church releases them, laying down its preferences in order to please God.

So brothers and sisters, don't come to this passage with questions Luke has no intention of answering. You won't find answers to them here. Instead, look at this passage for what it tells us: That the Spirit speaks to His church; that the Spirit says "Let that one go." And when He calls, the church listens and obeys. So listen to and obey Him. Amen.