

PAUL AND BARNABAS AT CYPRUS:
THE NEW AGE MOVEMENT VS. THE MISSIONS MOVEMENT
ACTS 13:4-12

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The *Huffington Post* observed several years ago, **“The New Age movement rose in the 1970s and has largely faded, but its impact remains...”** (*Huffington Post*, 4/25/2016) My high school class had as its graduation song “There’s a New World Coming,” by Mama Cass Elliot. That song reflected some of those New Age beliefs.

My AI Search Assist defines the New Age movement in this way: **“The New Age movement is a diverse spiritual and religious phenomenon that emerged in the 1970s, characterized by an eclectic mix of beliefs and practices drawn from various traditions, including Eastern mysticism, astrology, and metaphysics. It emphasizes personal transformation, holistic healing, and the idea of a coming ‘New Age’ of peace and enlightenment.”**

This movement has different branches which overlap. There is a humanistic branch which focuses on self-improvement and self-actualization and meditation and yoga. There is an occult branch which focuses on astrology and ouija boards and tarot cards. There is a spiritualism branch which talks about spirit guides and mediums. There is an eastern religion branch which talks about reincarnation and the god within. Christian Science and Scientology and the Bahai faith have beliefs consistent with the New Age movement.

While the term “New Age movement” may not get so much attention today, the beliefs it represents are still pretty popular. A Pew Research Center poll in 2018 found that 40% of Americans believe in psychics. One third of Americans supposedly believe in reincarnation. Twenty-nine per cent of Americans claim to believe in astrology.

Most New Age beliefs and practices are not really new. They are actually very old. In the passage before us this morning the first Christian missionaries encounter an earlier form of the New Age movement. We want to see how the Christians responded to this movement, and consider how its present manifestations may affect us in the twenty-first century.

We have seen from our study of the Book of Acts thus far that Jesus had commanded His disciples to be witnesses for Him in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and ultimately to the ends of the earth. To this point in our study we have seen the witness extended to Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria. In recent weeks we have seen the groundwork laid for an outreach to the ends of the world. That outreach necessarily involves a Jewish Christian mission to the Gentiles. The gospel at Antioch

(PROJECTOR ON--- ANTIOCH 02) had made inroads among the Gentiles as well as the Jews in that Syrian city. Last week we saw that the Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas to be sent out from that church to reach people with the gospel in other parts of the world.

I.

Let's look then at vv. 4 & 5 of #13 as we consider THE BEGINNING OF THE FIRST MISSIONARY TRIP AND THE PATTERN OF OUTREACH. (I. THE BEGINNING OF THE FIRST...) The author Luke writes, **"So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them."**

Paul and Barnabas left Antioch (FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY), and they went down to Seleucia, the port city on the Mediterranean Sea. From there they caught a boat going over to Cyprus. The island of Cyprus is about 140 miles long and 60 miles wide. It had been largely colonized by the Greeks centuries earlier. (CYPRUS 02) By this time the island had become a Roman province. It was generally a prosperous place. Copper mining and shipbuilding were perhaps the most significant industries.

Cyprus was a logical first step in this missionary journey. The gospel had originated to the south of Antioch in Jerusalem. Paul's hometown of Tarsus was the first major city to the north of Antioch. Paul had preached there before coming to Antioch. Cyprus was also the place where Barnabas was born and raised. In #11 we were told that some of the founders of the church at Antioch also came from the island. So no doubt there was much interest in Antioch that friends and relatives on Cyprus be exposed to the gospel.

The first stop on Cyprus was Salamis, which was the largest city on the island. The reference to synagogues in the plural indicates that there was a significant Jewish population here. (PROJECTOR OFF) But since Paul had been called to be an apostle to the Gentiles, we might wonder why he began with, and later continued, this pattern of going first to the synagogues. There were several reasons for this. **First**, God continued to have a special interest in the Jewish people. Though the religious leadership had rejected the messiahship of Jesus, the Lord's promises to make the nation great were to be, and still are to be, fulfilled.

Second, the Jews were the countrymen of Paul and Barnabas. They shared a common religious and cultural heritage. Jesus was their Messiah. He was the focus of much of the prophecy of their holy books. It was only natural to preach to them first.

Third, most of the first century synagogues seemed to have Gentiles who had various levels of involvement. If this missionary party was going to reach Gentiles, the logical people to evangelize first were Gentiles who had some exposure to the truths of the Hebrew Bible.

All of us Christians have been commanded to be witnesses for Christ. The natural place to begin this witness is with people in our sphere of influence. It is only natural that we reach out first to family and friends and co-workers. Beyond that, a logical game plan is to look for others with whom we share things in common--- those with the same hobbies, the same sports interests, the same political interests, the same religious background, the same cultural background, and the same situation in life. We don't limit our witness to that. Paul and Barnabas did not. But it is a good place to begin.

Notice also that John Mark came along as a helper. The Book of Colossians says that he was the cousin of Barnabas. Just what role he had as a helper is not specified. But he may well have had value in that he, unlike Saul and Barnabas, knew Jesus personally in his earthly life. He was an eyewitness to many of the events of the crucifixion and resurrection. So he could give personal testimony in support of the message of Paul and Barnabas.

II.

(PROJECTOR ON--- II. ELYMAS THE MAGICIAN AND...) In vv. 6-8 then we come to ELYMAS THE MAGICIAN AND THE DANGERS OF THE OLD NEW AGE MOVEMENT. Verse 6 says that they went through the whole island as far as Paphos. Probably they did evangelism along the way. Paphos was a hundred miles southwest of Salamis. (PAPHOS) Though not as big as Salamis, it was the provincial capital of the island. It also had a large shrine dedicated to the worship of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. (APHRODITE SHRINE)

There are two key characters whom Paul and Barnabas meet at Paphos. One is Sergius Paulus. He was the Roman governor of the island. His name Paulus was the Latin equivalent of the Greek name Paul. (OVERHEAD OFF) Paulus was a proconsul, which was a technical political term. Some Roman governors were appointed directly by the emperor. They were called procurators. Pontius Pilate was one of those. Other Roman governors, like Paulus, were appointed by the Roman Senate. They were called proconsuls.

In 1877 this stone (PROJECTOR ON--- SERGIUS PAULUS) bearing the name of Paulus in Latin was discovered near Pathos, confirming his presence here as governor. Ten years later a similar stone was discovered in Rome, suggesting that Paulus later served in the Roman capital in a leadership capacity. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The key character reference that Luke makes about Paulus is that he was a "man of intelligence." The original Greek word refers to understanding and perceptiveness. He was not just a man who possessed an education. He was also a deep thinker. This guy apparently thought about the fundamental issues of life. He asked questions like: Who am I? Where am I going? What is the meaning of life? Why am I here?

One of the reasons that more people don't respond to the gospel of Christ is that many don't think much about these fundamental questions of life. They live their lives focused only on the here and now and the events of daily life.

The *Screwtape Letters*, by C.S. Lewis, is a fictional account of the letters of a senior demon to a junior demon concerning a man given into this younger demon's charge. In the first letter the senior demon gives advice to the junior demon about how to handle this human. He writes, **"Remember, he is not, like you, a pure spirit. Never having been a human (oh, that abominable advantage of the Enemy's!) you don't realise how enslaved they are to the pressure of the ordinary. I once had a patient, a sound atheist, who used to read in the British Museum. One day, as he sat reading, I saw a train of thought in his mind beginning to go the wrong way. The Enemy, of course, was at his elbow in a moment.... I struck instantly at the part of the man which I had best under my control, and suggested that it was just about time he had some lunch. ...the patient brightened up considerably; and by the time I had added 'Much better come back after lunch and go into it with a fresh mind,' he was already halfway to the door. Once he was in the street the battle was won. I showed him a newsboy shouting the midday paper, and a No. 73 bus going past, and before he reached the bottom of the steps I had got into him an unalterable conviction that, whatever odd ideas might come into a man's head when he was shut up alone with his books, a healthy dose of 'real life' (by which he meant the bus and the newsboy) was enough to show him that all 'that sort of thing' just couldn't be true. He knew he'd had a narrow escape, and in later years was fond of talking about 'that inarticulate sense for actuality which is our ultimate safeguard against the aberrations of mere logic.' He is now safe in Our Father's house."** Our enslavement to the mundane can keep us from pondering ultimate questions about the meaning of life.

Sergius Paulus was not a man whose focus was limited to the ordinary. He heard something about the preaching of Paul and Barnabas. Perhaps the Jews complained to him about the divisions they were creating with their heretical teaching. So he called them in to hear what they had to say.

The other key player in this drama was Bar-Jesus, who came to oppose the teaching of Paul and Barnabas. His name was the Aramaic equivalent of "Son of Jesus," which in turn was the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew name Joshua, which means "God is salvation." Though this man bore the same name as Jesus, he was a false imitation. The Apostle John would later warn his congregation about antichrists that had arisen. This man was just such an antichrist. He was an opponent of the true Jesus.

In v. 6 Luke notes three things about Bar-Jesus. **First**, he points out that the man was Jewish. He was a descendant of Abraham. He was a child of the covenants of God. He was a possessor of the true revelation of God. Yet he now became an opponent of the truth. Down through history there have been other Jews who have been famous opponents of the truth of God. Karl Marx was Jewish. Leon Trotsky, one of the architects of the Russian Revolution, was Jewish.

The **second** thing that Luke notes about Bar-Jesus is that he was a false prophet. He claimed to be a spokesman for God. He claimed to possess certain spiritual truths and wisdom and knowledge of the future. Leaders throughout the Ancient Near East were always interested in getting an edge over others by having men around who had special insight into the present and future. Often such people were included among the advisors of important officials.

Bar-Jesus, however, was not a true prophet. The Hebrew Bible contains two tests for a prophet of God. In the first five verses of Deuteronomy 13 (PROJECTOR ON--- DEUTERONOMY 13:1-2) Moses says, **“If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ (DEUTERONOMY 13:3) you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the Lord your God is testing you... (DEUTERONOMY 13:5) But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the Lord your God...”** If an individual claims to be a prophet, and even does supernatural things, including predicting future events accurately, but teaches doctrine at odds with basic truths about the true God, he is a false prophet. The Old Testament penalty for such an individual was death. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Today there are cult leaders and gurus and religious leaders who claim to be prophets. But because these people have doctrinal beliefs that promote worship of a false god, because they do not promote worship of the unique God-man Jesus Christ, they are false prophets.

The second test for a prophet was 100% accuracy in future predictions. Note the dual reference to the importance of both accuracy and doctrinal belief in the true God in Deuteronomy #18 vv. 20-22. (DEUTERONOMY 18:20) Moses says, **“But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.”** (DEUTERONOMY 18:21) **And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?’— (DEUTERONOMY 18:22) when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.”** One inaccurate prediction, or any teaching which promoted the worship of another God, was grounds for the death penalty. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The danger that we face in some segments of the church today is that there are some Christians who claim to have the gift of prophecy, or at least claim occasionally to have a word of prophecy. Just prior to the 2020 presidential election there were a number of Christians who claimed to be prophets who declared that Donald Trump was going to be elected and serve as president for the next four years. Right here in Las Vegas Donald Trump was present in a church when the woman pastor announced that God

told her that morning that Donald Trump was sure to be reelected in a couple of months. It was a lie. She is a false prophet. Paul in 1 Corinthians #13 v. 8 seemed to indicate that the gift of prophecy would disappear from the church.

I have yet to see a Christian who claimed to have a gift of, or word of, prophecy willing to submit himself or herself to the Biblical test of 100% accuracy and the corresponding penalty of death for one wrong prediction. To preach or teach God's word is an important responsibility. That is not prophecy in the strict Biblical sense. To claim to speak direct revelation from God is prophecy, and that is a very serious claim.

The **third** thing that Luke says about Bar-Jesus is that he is a "magician." In Greek the word is *magos*. It is the word that is used to describe the magi who came to see the baby Jesus. We refer to them as wise men. In actuality they were magicians. They dabbled in astrology and divination and other occult practices. We tend to regard them favorably because they were pagans who came to Israel in search of spiritual truth. They didn't know any better.

This Bar-Jesus did know better. He was Jewish. Yet he dabbled in occult practices. He probably took some things from the Jewish faith and added some mysticism from the east and perhaps some ritual practices from Asia Minor and maybe some intellectualism from the schools of Egypt. He ended up with a syncretistic system and presented himself as a possessor of special spiritual wisdom.

His behavior was contrary to his own Biblical heritage. The same chapter in Deuteronomy that describes the necessity of complete accuracy for prophets of God spoke against practices of magic. (PROJECTOR ON--- DEUTERONOMY 18:10) In Deuteronomy #18 vv. 10-12 Moses says, "**There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering--- which refers to a practice where children were made to pass between red hot idols of other gods--- anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer (DEUTERONOMY 18:11-12) or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord...**"

Unfortunately many of these same practices are still around today. You can find your daily horoscope in many newspapers. You can find phone numbers for psychic hotlines on informercials on TV. (PROJECTOR OFF) You can buy ouija boards and tarot cards in some toy stores. I found a list online which has 26 stores in the Las Vegas area which cater to the occult and New Age movement.

Initially we may not tend to think that this is much of a direct threat to our faith. But consider the meaning of the original Greek word for "magic" that appears here in our text. According to the *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*: "**Magic is the technique of manipulating supernatural or supernormal forces to attain one's own ends.**" (REPEAT) How might the practice of invoking the saints or using prayer beads relate to this definition?

On the Protestant side of the ledger consider the statements of people connected with the faith movement. Marilyn Hickey (PROJECTOR ON--- MARILYN HICKEY) can be seen on TV and serves on the board of regents at Oral Roberts University. She claims that by saying the right words you can achieve your own ends. In one talk she said, **“What do you need? I need money. Start creating it. Start speaking about it. Start speaking it into being. Speak to your billfold. Say, ‘You big, thick billfold full of money.’ Speak to your checkbook. Say, ‘You, checkbook, you’ve never been so prosperous since I owned you. You’re just jammed full of money.’”** (Audio tape #186, “Claim Your Miracles.” Side 2)

“Magic is the technique of manipulating supernatural or supernormal forces to attain one’s own ends.” Few of us may be guilty of any of this. But consider our own prayer lives. (PROJECTOR OFF) How often do we approach prayer with the intention of using it as the means to manipulate God to get what we want? I’ve been guilty of that. Sure, the Bible says that we are to be anxious for nothing but in everything with prayer and supplication we are to make our requests known to God. But Biblical prayer is primarily getting from God what God wants for us. It is claiming His promises. It is the seeking of His will. It is getting our will in alignment with His will, not getting His will in alignment with our will.

Bar-Jesus, then, was a Jew. He was a false prophet. He was a magician. Verse 8 says that he was also known as Elymas. He was present with Sergius Paulus when Paul and Barnabas explained their message. Bar-Jesus Elymas probably took his beliefs and practices from a variety of religious and philosophical traditions. He was a religious pluralist. The problem with Biblical Christianity is that it is so absolutist. Barnabas and Paul explained to Paulus that Jesus was the only way to God, that there was salvation in no other name under heaven given among men.

That was more than this magician could stomach. Probably there was a bit of an argument or debate between the two sides. Elymas may have been concerned that his position as government advisor was at risk if Governor Paulus believed the other Paul and his partner Barnabas.

Notice also that there are significant parallels with the opposition that Paul and Barnabas receive here and the magician named Simon whom Peter and John encountered in Samaria. When the gospel first began to reach beyond Judea to Samaria, Peter and John went on a trip to see what was going on and to provide spiritual instruction. One of the first people whom they encountered was Simon the magician, who according to early church tradition continued to be an opponent of Christianity for a number of years. Like Bar-Jesus Simon was a false prophet and magician.

When significant missionary outreach begins to happen, Christians can count on receiving demonic opposition. I mentioned last week my missionary friend Harry Beard who went to Thailand. When the Beards and their missionary partners were about to

present the story of the Bible for the first time in the language of the people of their remote tribal village, a Buddhist priest showed up to encourage the people to establish a Buddhist meeting place in their village. The missionaries had never seen a Buddhist priest visit that village until then. Right after that rebels from across the border in Burma showed up in the area, and the missionaries had to leave for a time. Fortunately the gospel did get out, and people responded.

So remember that with significant evangelistic outreaches for the Lord, we can count on running into spiritual opposition. Paul and Barnabas did. We will, too.

III.

Finally in vv. 9-12 we encounter PAUL AND PAULUS AND THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. PAUL AND PAULUS AND THE...) Verse 9 marks a turning point in the missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas. Luke says, **“But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him...”** Saul is called Paul for the first time in the Biblical text. Saul was his Jewish name. But being a Roman citizen and coming originally from a Gentile city, Paul also had a Greek name. That name was Paul, which in Greek means “little.” Because Paul is going to be the missionary to the Gentiles and because he is going to be dealing primarily with Gentile people in Gentile territory, he will be known more by his Roman name Paul.

From this point on Paul also seems to take the lead in the missionary team. Before this it was Barnabas and Saul. After this it is Paul and Barnabas. Notice in v. 13 that it is “Paul and his companions.” Paul was an aggressive individual. He had a strong personality. He was a natural leader. Being a Roman citizen from a Gentile city, he understood the mindset of the Gentiles that they were seeking to reach, perhaps better than his other team members.

Now Paul confronts Bar-Jesus. He says in vv. 10 & 11, **“You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time.”** How could a loving Christian say such harsh things? Verse 9 says that Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit. In the Book of Acts the term “filled with the Holy Spirit” usually refers to a special empowerment from God. It seems that Paul’s outburst and subsequent action came from a God who was displaying His judgment upon sin. This sin was of an especially blatant variety. Bar-Jesus claimed to be a prophet of God, but he was now opposing the worship of the true God.

Ironically Paul had experienced temporary blindness in his divine encounter on the road to Damascus. Now he brings this judgment upon Elymas. It is a miraculous judgment which serves to verify his status as an apostle of God.

I suspect that this sudden blindness upon the false prophet presented a rather humorous scene. This wealthy, blasphemous, mouthy, proud magician suddenly encountered “magic” that he had never witnessed before. I suspect that there was

instant humility. As Elymas groped around for someone to lead him, the others present may have been reluctant to help out. This Christian missionary had just seemingly struck the opponent of their message blind. How anxious was anyone else going to be to show themselves to be friendly to the magician? Who knows what would happen to them if they were perceived as being too friendly to the guy who had just become the object of God's judgment. I wonder if Bar-Jesus suddenly found himself without friends.

Verse 12 describes the response of Paulus: **"Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord."** The focus of his amazement was not upon the miracle he had just witnessed. No doubt that was a factor that verified the message of Paul and Barnabas. But the focus of the governor's amazement was the teaching of the Lord. Apparently this man became a follower of Jesus.

As in the first century we live in a culture that is full of false teaching. We have New Agers, pantheists, humanists, atheists, cultists, occultists, and pseudo-Christians. The response of Paul and Barnabas to the situation at Pathos is instructive about the kind of response that we need to have to our culture. **First**, we need to be on guard against false teaching. There are a lot of crazy things being taught in the world around us. Some of it claims to be Christian but really is not. Some of this false teaching can be traced to the New Age movement.

Second, we need to follow the example of Paul and Barnabas in teaching and preaching and evangelizing. The best way to combat error is to promote and live the truth. We seek first to reach the people in our realm of influence and move out from there.

Third, we need to rely upon the Holy Spirit. We need His power to live and evangelize in a pluralistic culture. We need to be obedient to God's Word. We need to pray. We need to rely upon the Holy Spirit. Ultimately it is only God who can change lives.

Doreen Virtue (DOREEN VIRTUE) was a psychotherapist. A New Age publisher agreed to turn her Ph.D. dissertation into a self-help book. This led to her writing fifty additional books in the next twenty years which promoted yoga, Eastern meditation, chakra cleansing, astrology, divination, horoscopes, crystals, and psychic readings. She became a popular speaker who conducted workshops around the world. She had appearances on Oprah and The View.

She says, **"All the while, I convinced myself I was actually a Christian, albeit an 'open-minded' Christian who was superior to all those narrow-minded followers who only believed in Jesus. For me, Jesus functioned as a 'spirit guide' who, like a magic genie, helped me make my wishes come true. I was a student of world religions, and I even had a necklace with symbols of all the major faiths. I believed all paths led to heaven and all religions were worshipping the same God."**

One day in January of 2015 she was driving along a road in Hawaii when she happened to tune in to Alistair Begg, the famous Cleveland pastor, on the radio. His message from 2 Timothy 2 was about people in the end times who will want their itching ears tickled by false teachers. That message got to her. She and her husband started going to an evangelical church. She was motivated to read the whole Bible.

Doreen Virtue writes, **“When I got to Deuteronomy 18:10-12, I encountered a list of sinful activities that included several I was practicing, such as divination, interpreting signs and omens, and mediumship. This passage says that people using these methods are ‘detestable,’ an abomination to God. I was broken, deeply shamed, and humbled by these words, I dropped to my knees in shame and sorrow. ‘I’m so sorry, God!’ I kept wailing in repentance. ‘I didn’t know!’ On that very day I gave my life to Jesus as Lord and Savior.”** (*Christianity Today*, March 2022)

Doreen went back to school. She got a master’s degree from Western Seminary in Portland, which happens to be connected with the Baptist umbrella group of which we are a part. She is now writing truly Christian books. (PROJECTOR OFF)

As Christians we need to guard against false teaching. We need to be faithful in promoting the gospel like Paul and Barnabas were. Then we also need to depend upon the Holy Spirit. For in the end it is only God who can change lives.