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Called to Kings?

Acts 13:4-12

Acts gives insight into who we are called to be witnesses to, and for this particular topic of kings, chapter 13 is useful. Before looking at that though, it is good to have a bit of context.

The book of Acts tells us how the Christian church began through a specific method. Before Jesus returned to heaven after his resurrection he told his disciples: *you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* (Acts 1:8).

Consequently, the church started in Jerusalem with Peter as the key player, then spread to the surrounding regions. (Philip went to Samaria, and Peter travelled more.) However, before the ends of the earth could be reached, God had to help the people of the church realise that the news of Jesus was not just for the Jews, but was for anyone.

Once God overcame this issue, we see that the ends of the earth began to be reached with Paul's first missionary journey (*Acts 13*). It all began with the Antioch church leaders, including Paul, feeling that the Holy Spirit was telling them to send off Paul with another leader, Barnabas, to the regions beyond:

The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper. They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he

wanted to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, "You are a child of the devil 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. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord. (Acts 13:4-12)

Explanation:

This is a great start to a mission, but the key event amidst all the magicians stuff and the spontaneous divine judgement, is that Paul's first missionary journey starts with a salvation. Sergius Paulus is potentially the first proper Gentile convert to Christianity in the Bible. John Stott writes: '*Luke surely intends us to view Sergius Paulus as the first totally Gentile convert, who had no religious background in Judaism.*'

The other important thing we find out about this guy is his job. He was the proconsul of Cyprus (a Roman magistrate who headed the government in a senatorial province where no troops were required). He was a man of significant cultural influence, in this case political influence.

Here Luke is highlighting an important feature of Paul's calling that isn't often talked about; Paul was a man who was called to engage with people of significant cultural influence. This continues throughout Acts as in chapter 18 Paul stands before another proconsul, Gallio, who rules in Paul's favour. Then in *Acts 21* Paul stands before Felix, the procurator of Judea (a step up from proconsul- a governor in a more important territory), and shares the good news of Jesus. This leads him to another procurator, Porcius Festus who is so intrigued by the message of Jesus that he introduces his friend to him, King Herod Agrippa.

Therefore, the picture Luke gives us of Paul is that he's someone who God leads time after time to people of political influence and who more often than not wins favour from them for the church, even if they don't become Christians themselves.

This is because it was God's calling on Paul for this to happen: *'This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles, and their kings and before the people of Israel.'* (Acts 9:15).

Paul was called to share the gospel with Jews, Gentiles, and also specifically Kings. This is not because kings are better or more important, but instead is because God knows that we as humans listen to some people more than others. E.g. Nicola Sturgeon's voice carries more weight than my son's primary school teacher. God chooses to work within our fallen ways of doing things, and in the area of influence this seems to be the case. Thus, God raises people to significant cultural influence to bring change.

We see this in the rest of the bible also.

In the Old Testament Abraham's descendants were transformed from a large extended family into a people, through Joseph being put into a position from which he could go to the king. God's people were then turned into a nation through Moses approaching a king whose family he had been adopted into. God then preserved his people in exile through many similar examples, such as Esther pleading to the king for help. Finally, God's people were returned from exile through Nehemiah holding a position of influence with the king.

In the New Testament, we see the same patterns happening again. To advance His kingdom, God needs a faithful people building attractive, loving, courageous communities and being witnesses to everyone they meet in the power of the Spirit. At the same time, He also needs some of those people to engage with the movers and shakers in society to allow His good news to keep going out.

How does this affect us today?

1. The church needs more Christians who exercise significant cultural influence.

Just like these cases in the Bible, unless some of us gain significant cultural influence, it's hard to see how the kingdom of God is going to advance again in a significant way in our nation.

2. We should be wary about chasing influence.

We need to move forward from this position carefully for two reasons:

Firstly, we've got to recognise our vulnerability in this area: pride. There is a very fine line between 'I want influence so I can advance God's kingdom' and 'I want influence because I want influence.' Chasing influence for its own sake, even masked with religious language whether it's done by individuals or churches, is idolatry and it will end in nothing good.

Secondly, however you look at it, the Bible makes clear that there are far more important things for us to do than gaining cultural influence, such as loving your neighbour as yourself. If chasing influence becomes your number one priority it is easy to forget that we're called to the people under our noses. Our neighbours.

Because of these dangers, the Bible shows that God's people do need to interact within influential structures, but there is no instruction for us to proactively chase after influence. Instead, what we see in the Bible is that at the right times, when necessary, God himself raises up individuals to those positions of influence, even when they weren't specifically chasing it. With Paul in *Acts 13:7* the proconsul sent for Paul, not the other way round. We cannot just sit there though, we must be available for God.

3. Make yourself available to be raised to influence.

All the examples from the Bible have one thing in common: They are all living their lives significantly outside of the gathered community of believers:

- Joseph- away from his family
- Esther and Nehemiah- in exile
- Paul- on a mission outside of the 1st century middle eastern Bible belt

These guys were living their lives in the world God called them to influence. Therefore, we have reason to live our lives in the thick of our culture, and not hide away in a church community.

Jesus' heart on this one was very clear. When he prayed for his followers in the Garden of Gethsemane: *My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one* (Jn 17:15). He wants us all in the thick of our culture, taking our jobs seriously, welcoming people into our lives who don't know Jesus, and getting involved in theirs.

For Paul this meant preaching to crowds, addressing synagogues, arguing with philosophers and witnessing to kings. For you it may mean simply building

relationships with your kids' friends' parents, or going to your work summer barbecue, or having your neighbours over for dinner.

However, for some of you who do that, God may have some other things for you too. He may want to rise you to influence in your social groups, in your workplace, in your community. Even beyond. But you do have to be out there and available for that to happen.

Paul puts the matter more positively in 1 Thess 4:11-12, and it's these verses that I want to leave you with:

Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

Paul was set apart for this influence stuff, how did he encourage Christians to live?

- Work hard in their jobs
- Live in such a way that you win respect of others

In this, we can make ourselves available for God.

Questions:

- What are the areas of influence that God has given you?
 - What did you think of Jonny's question about how influential the church should be?
 - Do you agree with Jonny that it's hard to see how the church will impact society without individuals who have significant cultural influence?
 - Why should we be wary of seeking cultural influence? How can we check our motives?
 - How can you make yourself available to God, whether for significant cultural influence or anything else?
 - What tempts us to get out of the world (*John 17:15*)?
 - Where are the places you might feel uncomfortable going to but might give the opportunity to influence people if you went to them?
 - What does *1 Thessalonians 4:11-12* look like for your life?
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