

The Ministry of the Holy Spirit
 Acts 13:1-12
 Tampa Covenant Church
 08 June 2025

Proposition: Because the Holy Spirit actively leads and empowers the church for gospel mission, we must be sensitive to his voice, follow his direction, and rely on his power; especially in the face of spiritual opposition.

FCF: Insensibility to the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit.

RHF: Through his death, burial, resurrection and ascension, Christ's promise of power to serve as his witnesses is given to us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

(#1) Introduction:

Before his ascension, Jesus promised his disciples something far greater than they anticipated: *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* When we turn the page, it's the Day of Pentecost.¹ And 120 Christ followers were gathered in prayer then suddenly a sound like a mighty rushing wind filled the house.² Tongues like fire appeared and rested on each one. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them. Just as Jesus promised, they received power; not to jump over buildings, but to boldly proclaim the gospel as his witnesses.

Their witness began in Jerusalem, but it wasn't until after Stephen's martyrdom that the gospel spread to Samaria and beyond. **(#2) In the face of** persecution, believers scattered as far North as Antioch, a major cosmopolitan city. There they preached to Jews and Gentiles alike and many turned to the Lord. When the Jerusalem church heard this news, they sent Barnabas, who saw God's grace and rejoiced. He then went to Tarsus, found Saul, and brought him back. For a year they taught together in the church at Antioch, where the disciples were first called Christians.

(#3 Blank) What began as a gathering of scattered believers and Gentile converts is now about to become a launching pad for global mission. So, we'll walk through the text and trace how the gospel advanced through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Particularly, the church's sensitivity to the Spirit's voice, their willingness to follow his leading, and their reliance on his power in the face of spiritual opposition. Then we'll consider how we can draw from their example in helping us to grow in our witness as a covenant community.

Sensitivity to the Spirit's Voice: *Barnabas and Saul set apart for a specific task (vv.1-3):*

(#4) Luke tells us in v.1, *"Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.* Here we see five leaders named: Barnabas (a Levite from Cyprus), Simeon, (black African), Lucius of Cyrene (from North Africa), Manaen (a Jewish man raised among the political elite), and Saul (former devout Jew from Tarsus). These leaders serve as a snapshot of the ethnic and cultural diversity in the city of Antioch.³ And a testimony of the multifaceted wisdom of God in forming one unified body out of a diverse people. The church at Antioch points to the beauty of the multicultural nature of the Kingdom as God so intended.

Back in the 50's, a leading missiologist named Donald McGavran who contributed a lot to the field of study, wrote a statement in one of his books that many still quibble **about today, (#5)** *"people prefer to become Christians without having to cross racial, linguistic, or class barriers."*⁴ According to McGavran's observation, the biggest obstacles to embracing the gospel seems more cultural than theological. This observation gave rise to what became known as the *"Homogenous Unit Principle."* Which suggests Churches grow fastest when the gospel is proclaimed along the same social lines. That way people don't have to cross ethnic, cultural, or class barriers in coming to the faith.⁵ The practice is still alive and well today in many forms. On the surface, it may seem to be a good strategy but it's not good theology. Because nowhere in the NT are we commanded to segregate churches by people group to promote growth. Scripture speaks to the contrary and we see it in this text. Church leaders from differing tribes, tongues and nations, seeking the will of God together in the covenant community.

(#6) In v.2 we read, *"While they were worshipping⁶ the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'* The word worshipping conveys the idea of performing sacred duties much like the OT priests in the temple. In the New Covenant, the priesthood applies to all believers who minister in bringing sacrifices of praise, thanksgiving and adoration to the Lord. And it's in the midst of this sincere expression of spiritual devotion and service that the Spirit of God speaks. Now, did he speak in an audible voice? Stott in his commentary writes, *"God most likely spoke to the church through one of the prophets. But the call could have been inward rather than outward; through the Spirit's witness in their hearts and minds."*⁷

No specific location or timeline is given. What's clear is that the gospel is advancing and these two men have been set apart for this special task. And it's important for us to see it wasn't a Barnabas and Saul mission. **(#7) It was a** church mission. In v.3, their departure was preceded by a time of intercessory prayer and fasting. Next, they were commissioned to serve as gospel witnesses by the laying on of hands. One writer said, *"the Christians in Antioch were 'acting in a new situation, without precedents, and simply committed their brothers to the grace of God for the task ahead'."*⁸

Led and Empowered by the Holy Spirit: *Proclaiming the good news in the face of opposition (vv.4-12)*

(#8) We pick up in v.4, Luke writes, *4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit,* Hmm, were they sent out by the church or the Holy Spirit? The answer is yes! The divine initiative always starts with God and the church's role is to discern and respond obediently to his will. From Antioch, they went down to Seleucia, then off to Cyprus. **(#9) Accompanied by** John Mark, they stopped at Salamis and proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews.⁹ Nothing new, Jesus did this during his earthly ministry and it became a common practice for Paul in subsequent missionary journeys.

(#10) Luke doesn't waste much ink on Salamis, rather he fast-forwards to the drama in Paphos. There, the team runs into a man who was a Jewish magician and false prophet; named Bar-Jesus, which literally means "son of Jesus." This man was anything but a son of Jesus. As a false prophet and magician, he didn't speak for God. Instead, he practiced sorcery, attempting to manipulate circumstances through spells and incantations. All of it stood in direct opposition to worshipping the one true God. And according to Jewish law, such practices were punishable by death.¹⁰

(#11) In v.7, “Bar-Jesus” is cozying up to Sergius Paulus; the Roman governor of Cyprus. This Gentile ruler is described as a man of intelligence who sends for Barnabas and Saul because he was seeking (strong desire) to hear the word of God. This guy is what we would call “low hanging fruit”; he was ripe for picking because the Spirit of God was working in his heart. But notice what happens next: Elymas the magician steps in to oppose them. So, just as Sergius Paulus is seeking to hear the word of God, Elymas was seeking to turn him away from coming to faith. Do you see the contrast? On one side, we have Barnabas and Saul, set apart by the Holy Spirit, commissioned by the church and sent out to do the work of the Lord. On the other hand, we have this greedy, false prophet seeking to oppose the work of the Lord. Church, we call this spiritual warfare. And we shouldn’t be surprised because when the gospel advances, the enemy pushes back.

(#12) But in v.9 and following, we witness the gospel pushback, “*But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him.*” Luke refers to Saul by his Roman name Paul and this name change marks Paul’s emergence as the clear leader of this missionary movement. Now, Paul full of the Holy Spirit, fixes his gaze on the Elymas the magician and goes all OT on him. He addressed him not as a “son of Jesus” but as the son of the devil. And he exposes him for who he is, “*an enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy.*” Elymas is doing the will of his father, the devil, by opposing the advancement of the gospel. Then comes the piercing question that cuts to the heart: “*Will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?*”¹¹ In other words, how long will you keep perverting the straight path of the Lord to salvation?

(#13) And Paul doesn’t stop with rebuke; he declares God’s judgment, “*Behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see for a time.*” Seems like it may be a temporary blindness, allowing Elymas to experience the power of God over the pseudo-power he relied on. And we’re told, “*immediately mist and darkness fell on him,*” and just like that he’s no longer seeking to turn Sergius Paulus from the faith, he’s now “*seeking people to lead him by the hand.*” Luke closes this account by saying, “*Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.*” Mission accomplished; the gospel is advancing through the faithful witness of the church.

(#14 Blank) The church at Antioch, gives us a good picture of what happens when a covenant community entrusts itself to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Last week, Lou reminded us that the Ascension points us to Christ’s mission. A mission that calls for our active participation as gospel witnesses. And church, none of this happens apart from the ministry of the Holy Spirit. If the gospel is going to advance beyond these walls and to the ends of the earth, we must assume the same posture as witnessed in the text: we must be sensitive to the Spirit’s voice, willing to follow where he leads, and rely on his enabling power in the face of opposition. **(#15) That’s our call so** lemme say a brief word concerning all three:

#1 Sensitivity to the Spirit’s Voice: *In community*

Sensitivity to the Spirit’s voice isn’t about sitting idly by and waiting for an audible word from heaven. It’s about cultivating a Spirit filled environment that actively seeks the will of the Lord. For the church at Antioch, it was communal life saturated in worship and the same must be true of us. As we gather each Lord’s Day and throughout the week in small groups, we don’t gather to “navel gaze” but to intentionally pursue the Lord’s will together; through his word, sacrament, prayer, and through shared discernment.

We share stories of God's faithfulness with one another; how he's presently using us and what may be on the horizon. And we ask questions of each other and listen intently: What is the Spirit of God stirring in our hearts? Where is he working among us? Who is he calling? Who is he sending? It's an ongoing process of opening our hearts and minds to hear the Spirit's voice. And in so doing, we assume a posture of readiness to respond in obedience to his word.

Years ago, Dick Mayer prayed in a prayer meeting that the Lord would open a door for us to minister to international students on college campuses. That they would come to faith in Christ and return home to serve as gospel witnesses to their families and friends. And years later, God opened that door through the ministry of International Students Inc., led by Ryan and Caroline Geer. Look at God; the nations are coming to us! This isn't a coincidence; it's answered prayer. What's more, it's not an individual mission; it's a church mission. So, we ask the questions of the outward facing ministries in our church: what is God doing in ISI and the other city groups? In Momco., VBS, OPUS, H.S Coop and New Hearts? And how will he use us to declare and demonstrate the gospel in it all? When we're listening, thinking and praying through questions like these then we're showing sensitivity **to the (#16)** Spirit's voice.

#2 Follow Where He Leads: *Not where we want to go*

Following where the Spirit leads is not about chasing ministry trends or crafting clever strategies; it's about faithfulness, even when it's uncomfortable. It's true, we all naturally gravitate toward the comfort of familiar surroundings with people who look like us, talk like us and act like us. But the Holy Spirit isn't bound by our preferences, sociological patterns, or cultural similarities. Because the gospel is not for one kind of people; it the good news that must be proclaimed to all people.

That's why church growth strategies like the "Homogenous Unit Principle" fall short because they limit the scope of the gospel. Just as the Spirit sent Paul and Barnabas from multiethnic Antioch into diverse and complex situations; he'll most likely do the same with us. And we don't have to go overseas to discover this. Just grab the dog and walk the neighborhood, scope out the office, and the various places you go throughout the week. We live in a city that's growing more and more diverse each day.

And when we encounter these differences, we can't see them as obstacles to avoid but as mission fields to cultivate. So, we ask God to grant opportunities for gospel conversations, enabling us to cast gospel seed and water in through love and prayer. Then trust in him for the growth, according to his appointed timeline. Because our willingness to follow where the Spirit leads; truly reflects the heart of God for the **(#17)** world he created.

#3 Rely on His Power: *Courage in the face of spiritual opposition*

When Paul and Barnabas arrived at Paphos, they faced significant opposition to the gospel. But Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, stood firm and spoke with boldness. No doubt he did the tangible work but the Spirit provided the wisdom and power needed in that moment. Paul set the example for all who would follow as he remained faithful to the gospel of Christ in life and also in death. This is the call for every Christian generation because the enemy still seeks to pervert the straight path of **the Lord. (#18)** Christian writer and apologist, John Blanchard wrote, "*The Christian life is not a playground, it's an arena.*"¹²

The quote should remind us of the countless Christians throughout church history who have endured persecution and even death for the sake of Christ. One example is of a young noblewoman who lived in N. Africa during the 3rd century, named Perpetua. (#19) Through her diary, we get a glimpse of her final days, her writing was so impactful that Augustine preached four sermons about her. She lived in a thriving Christian community. And during that time, the emperor viewed Christianity as a threat to Roman unity and the crackdown began. She was arrested while preparing for baptism.

As she awaited trial, her pagan father pleaded with her to renounce the faith for the sake of her infant son and her family's honor (#20) but she refused. She responded, *"It will all happen in the prisoner's dock as God wills, for you may be sure that we are not left to ourselves but are all in his power."*¹³ She and her companions were sentenced to die in the arena where they faced wild beasts, gladiators, and a hostile crowd. After repeated animal attacks, they were executed by sword, thus becoming martyrs for the faith. Her life reminds us that faithful gospel witness both in life and in death, rests in the power God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

(#21 Blank) Conclusion:

By God's mercy, our arenas may not end in death but they will still test our faith. And it's in these moments we remember how the gospel of grace has come to us at such a great cost. Our Savior willingly suffered, bled and died. But he rose again by the power of the Spirit. And now, the same Spirit that brought again Jesus Christ from the dead dwells in us. He was present with the church at Antioch and he's now present with us. And as we remain sensitive to his voice, follow him where he leads and rely on his power. He will grant us the right combination of charity, humility and boldness to speak the truth of the gospel to those he's drawing to himself for his glory. So, on this Pentecost Sunday and beyond may he find us faithfully striving together by his grace toward that end.

¹ Pentecost: Going back to the OT, what came to be known, as Pentecost was actually the feast of weeks or feast of harvest: A feast that was observed seven Sabbaths and a day after the first fruits were offered (Lev. 23:15-21). This feast was a joyous occasion that was celebrated at the end of harvest cycle to thank God his for goodness and provision.

² οἶκος – A House, temple or building. According to John Stott, “We do not know, therefore, if the ‘house’ of verse 2 is still the upper room (Acts 1:13; 2:46b) or one of the many rooms or halls of the temple (Lk. 24:53; Acts 2:46a).” John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, Logos Software. cf. Peterson, “From v. 2 it appears that they were once again gathered in a house rather than in the temple precincts.” David G. Peterson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Acts of the Apostles*, Logos Software.

³ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church & the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 216.

⁴ Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (New York: Friendship Press, 1955), 1.

⁵ Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 190–211.

⁶ Worshipping: λειτουργέω (*leitourgeō*): perform religious duties, render a religious service (Ac 13:2; Heb 10:11+; Tit 1:9). A further spiritualization is found in Acts 13:2, where λειτουργέω is used with τῷ κυρίῳ (“to the Lord”) and alongside νηστεύω G3764 (“to fast”) to describe what was evidently a time of spiritual worship in the church in Antioch. Moisés Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 106.

⁷ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church & the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 217.

⁸ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 377.

⁹ Barnabas and Saul sought to go to the synagogues first to preach to fellow Jews who were waiting for the hope of Israel and possessed knowledge of the Scriptures. Jesus preached and taught in the synagogues during his earthly ministry (Matt 4:23; 13:54; Mark 1:21; Luke 4:15, 44; John 6:59; 18:20). And this would become Paul’s practice in his subsequent missionary journeys (Acts 9:20; 13:14, 14:1; 17:17; 18:7).

¹⁰ See Deut 18:10.

¹¹ for the phraseology see Jer. 5:27; Gen. 32:11; Prov. 10:9; Hos. 14:9), and pronounced the judgment of God upon him in the form of an attack of blindness.

I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 233.

¹² John Blanchard, *The Complete Treasury of Gathered Gold*, A treasury of quotations for Christians, (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2006), Logos Software.

¹³ Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, “Introduction,” in *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 362.