

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

Being Led by the Spirit

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Acts 16:6-10

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Good morning, everyone, please turn in your Bibles to Acts 16:6-10. Today we are continuing to make our way through the book of Acts and learn what it looks like to be the Church. Last week Ryan guided us through Paul’s actions after the Jerusalem council and how he and Timothy navigated personal considerations and sacrifices for the sake of the mission. This morning we will see how the Holy Spirit intervenes and redirects Paul and his companions as they continue on their missionary Journey.

There are certain decisions in life that are clear cut. When we have to choose between something good and something bad, it is not hard to know which one we should choose. But what do we do when forced to choose between two good options, or even three. My wife and I have this problem all the time when trying to decide where to eat. It is not that the options are bad, it is just that there are too many options that are good. It can be hard to know how to choose between multiple good options.

It can be hard to know which good path we should follow in life. As we turn our attention to the text this morning we will see that even the Apostle Paul needed some guidance and intervention from the Holy Spirit.

Hopefully you have your Bibles open to Acts 16.

Hear now the Word of the Lord beginning at verse 6.

And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

This is the Word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

The way that we have been approaching this series has been to observe various principles and practices from the events recorded in the book of Acts and to be challenged by them. Before we can do that with our text this morning, we need to spend some time unpacking and understanding what we see in this story before us.

What do we see in this story?

The first thing that we are meant to see in this story is:

1. An Intentional Emphasis

This story on the surface can seem quite jarring. We see things like the Holy Spirit forbidding Paul and his companions to preach the gospel in Asia and again the Spirit not allowing them into Bithynia either.

Paul and his companions are striving to fulfill the great commission; they are longing to preach the gospel to all nations and to make disciples wherever they go. They have just set out from Jerusalem to revisit the Churches that they had planted on Paul's first missionary journey and now they have finished telling them all of the decision that was reached in Jerusalem. They have given their report and encouraged these Churches and now they long to set out to continue the work of preaching the Gospel in Asia, which is modern day Turkey.

Yet the Holy Spirit does not allow them.

So, they pivot and decide to go North and preach the Gospel along the coast of the Black Sea in Bithynia. And again, the Holy Spirit does not let them.

So, they continue along the coast to Troas where Paul is given a vision calling him to go to Macedonia.

This, of course, leaves us with a few questions, I'm sure.

Questions like: Why weren't they allowed into Asia or Bithynia, and how did the Holy Spirit forbid them to name a few.

It is important for us to notice that the text doesn't even try to answer any of these questions. This passage is striking in the lack of details that it provides.

I think that is intentional.

I think that Luke is intentionally leaves out these details that we would love to know because he wants to make it clear that the point of the text is not HOW the Spirit directed these apostles, or WHY he directed them this way.

The point is that these apostles were led by the Spirit.

The point is that the Spirit gave them direction and they followed.

That's the first thing that we see in this story. And the second thing we see is:

2. A Principle of Tension

To see this most clearly we have to look at these events within their larger narrative context.

I want to look back for a second at what we saw a couple of weeks ago in Acts 15. After the Jerusalem council the Apostles and Elders there met and decided that it would be good to send some people with Paul and Barnabas to deliver a letter to the churches detailing the council's decision. We find this in Acts 15:25-27 "it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked

their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.” (Acts 15:25-27 ESV)

Notice how Luke records that the Apostles and Elders said, “It seemed good to us to choose men and them to you.”

The Apostles and Elders in Jerusalem used their discernment to make a decision on the best people to send with Paul and Barnabas.

It is interesting to note the change from Acts 15 to here in Acts 16. In Acts 15 the apostles and elders are using wisdom and discernment to make decisions on the best way forward yet here in Acts 16, the Holy Spirit intervenes and redirects the Apostles when they thought it was best to go into Asia.

I love the way Peterson captures this tension in his commentary. He writes “Once again the narrator shows keen interest in the dialogue between human purpose and divine purpose, indicating that Jesus’ witnesses, too, must patiently endure the frustration of their own plans in order to discover the opportunity that God holds open. This opportunity may not be the next logical step by human calculation.”¹

We see here that God is closing some doors on the Apostle Paul’s missionary efforts. Yet while they were in Troas, no doubt slightly frustrated and confused as to what they should do about these closed doors, God opens a window.

God frustrates their desires to share the Gospel in Asia and Bithynia to lead them to bringing the Gospel to Europe for the first time. He closes 2 doors and opens a window. And that window leads into major Gospel growth and expansion into Europe by God’s grace.

The lack of details in this passage highlights that this is the primary emphasis of the passage. These are men who are paying attention to the leadings and promptings of the Holy Spirit and are humble enough to submit their plans to His leadership.

¹ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 453–454.

It is important to remember that the stories in the book of Acts describe what happened. They are not always intended to prescribe for us exactly how things should look now. However, we know that what happened at Pentecost sets the precedent for all Christians. ALL CHRISTIANS are filled with the Holy Spirit.

Not only that, but God cares about the lives and directions of his people.

I like the way Peterson puts it.

“We cannot expect the regular guidance of visions and prophecies in our everyday decision making, but we are encouraged by Luke’s narrative to believe in God’s sovereign overruling and intervention to direct the progress of his word and his people, where necessary.”²

Naturally we should not expect the Holy Spirit to intervene in any and all circumstances. We should not expect to receive a vision every morning telling us whether we should eat Corn Flakes or Cheerios after all.

But what we can expect is the Holy Spirit to be present and active in the Church as we seek to fulfill God’s commands to make disciples of all nations.

We can and should expect the Holy Spirit to work on us and in our decision-making processes. Sometimes, just like with Paul and his companions here, the Spirit closes some doors and opens others.

Sometimes this happens through extraordinary means, like Paul’s vision of the Macedonian man, but more often than not the Spirit works through ordinary means. Like not getting the job offer you expected or having plans fall through.

Our responsibility is to seek the Spirit’s guidance and to be thoughtfully considering how we go about making decisions. Frankly, there is no cookie cutter approach to ensuring that we are being

² David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 457.

led by Spirit perfectly. There is no step-by-step instruction manual for how to make sure we are walking in step with the Spirit.

What we see in our text this morning, rather, are principles that we can employ to help position ourselves to be led by the Spirit. So far, we have seen the intentional emphasis of this narrative, we have seen the principle of tension between our initiative and God's sovereign plan. And now we will turn our attention to four principles on how we can live out that tension. These principles help put us in a place where we can more clearly notice the leading and prompting of the Spirit and they position us in a way that we are more readily able to respond to those leadings.

Principles for Being Led by the Spirit.

The first principle that we see in our text this morning is that helps position us to be led by the Holy Spirit is to:

1. Maintain Biblical Priorities.

When we consider this story and the way the Holy Spirit intervenes and redirects Paul and his companions on their journey it is imperative that we remember that, while God clearly had prioritized Macedonia as a mission field above Asia and Bithynia, these brothers were clearly striving to obey Jesus' command to go and make disciples of all nations.

Paul and his companions were seeking to obey the Word of God. They wanted to do what God had commanded. And this desire to do God's will is what made it possible for the Spirit to redirect them. When we are already moving in the right direction it is easier for the Spirit to move us where we need to be.

The problem is that so often we prioritize the wrong things. We seek the Spirit's guidance when it isn't necessary and we don't look for it when it is.

I remember back when I was younger and working at summer camp and there was this female counsellor that I had a big crush on. And, because I was such a Godly young man, I wanted to

make sure that it was God's will for me to pursue this person. So, I prayed to God and asked if it was his will.

Now I couldn't be sure if I was feeling God move in my heart or if I just was feeling butterflies, so I came up with a plan. I took a quarter and said to God, "God if it is your will for me to date this person then when I flip the coin make it land on heads." Then I flipped the coin. It was tails. So, I prayed to God "God, best two out of three..."

Granted that is a bit of a silly illustration but the point still stands. Often our lack of clarity or confidence that we are doing the will of God stems from us having misguided priorities. You see, when our desires and priorities are in line with God's word then our hearts are already positioned in such a way that God can move them as he pleases.

I like the way that Kevin DeYoung puts it in his book "*Just Do Something*". He writes: "So the end of the matter is this: Live for God. Obey the Scriptures. Think of others before yourself. Be holy. Love Jesus. And as you do these things, do whatever else you like, with whomever you like, wherever you like, and you'll be walking in the will of God."³

So, if my greatest desires are to love the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, and mind and to love my neighbor as myself then I don't need to be paralyzed by fear over whether I go to university or trade school. It doesn't really matter if I send my kids to Public School, Christian School or we homeschool them if my priority is to raise them up in the ways they should go and to disciple them.

If we are immersing ourselves in the Word of God, if we are reading it regularly, sitting under Biblical teaching, letting it shape our desires and priorities than we are putting ourselves in perfect position to be moved by the Spirit. We are better equipping ourselves to pay attention to the prompting of the Holy Spirit in our hearts as well as being guided by the clearly communicated desires of God in his Word.

³ Kevin DeYoung, *Just Do Something: A Liberating Approach to Finding God's Will*

Now let me be abundantly clear here. Ultimately the Spirit will never tell us something now that contradicts something we see in Scripture. The Bible is the ultimate standard by which we test every inclination, leading, or desire that we think is from the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit won't be guiding you to marry an unbeliever for example. Neither will he lead you to have an affair with your spouse. Those desires are not from him.

We must hold everything we think the Spirit is saying against the lens of Scripture. We must allow ourselves to be shaped by God's word so that our priorities are aligned with the Word of God.

The Second principle that will position us to be led by the Spirit is:

2. Hold your plans loosely.

We see in this story that the Apostle Paul and his companions were willing to change their trajectory in response to the Spirit's leading not once but twice. They had come together and decided that heading into Asia to share the gospel message there would be the best next step. Then the Holy Spirit intervenes, and they are willing to let go of that idea and make a new plan. So, they decide to head to Bithynia instead. Once again, the Holy Spirit leads them away from their plan and, once again, they are willing to listen and adjust their plans.

Clearly, these brothers were not afraid to let go of their plans. They were willing to accept the fact that God was closing the doors they planned on going through.

And that is easier said than done, isn't it?

It is easy for us to sit here and say that we would do the same thing if we were in their position. But unfortunately, more often than not, when God closes a door on our plans we simply try and break down the door.

Imagine you planned on moving your family to another town. You've got a new job that allows you to work from anywhere. There is a great house that you've just purchased. You're in the process of selling your house. You've even signed your kids up for the local soccer league in the new town. And then you feel a strong sense that you should not move your family. You feel that

God is calling you to serve your current community. Would you listen? Or would you brush that aside and carry on? Suppose the purchase of your new home falls through? Would you take that as confirmation, or would you buy another house? Suppose a close Christian friend approached you and told you they felt that you should not be moving away. Would you listen?

Now I am not saying that all of these things are definitive proof that God is closing a door. But the Holy Spirit often moves in similar ways. The point of those questions is to get you thinking about how willing you are to let go of your plans.

Consider what the Apostle James says in James 4 “Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”— yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.” (James 4:13-16 ESV)

James helpfully reminds us that we do not know what tomorrow will bring. We ought to be humble enough to admit that fact. We ought not to be so arrogant as to think we can plan ahead with 100% certainty and rigidity. We need to hold on to our plans loosely and be humble and willing to submit our plans to the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit.

If we aren't willing to surrender our plans and we boldly move forward despite the Holy Spirit closing doors than we can easily find ourselves making serious mistakes, often with significant and enduring consequences.

We need to hold on to our plans loosely.

But in order to hold on to our plans, we still have to make plans.

And that is our third Principle that we see in the text:

3. Avoid Analysis Paralysis

There are ditches on either side of the Spirit-led road here. There is the ditch on the one side of not being willing to change or let go of our plans. Then there is the ditch on the other side of

being so eager to submit our plans to the Spirit that we are actually unwilling to make any decisions whatsoever.

In those situations, we become paralyzed by indecision and worry about making the wrong choice.

This can easily be the case for young people who are trying to determine what to do after high school. They don't know which university to go to, or which career to pursue and so they don't really pursue anything. They are afraid to commit to any long-term plan because they worry that it might not be God's will for their life. They become paralyzed by indecision and fear.

Notice that that is NOT what happened here in our text this morning. These men made a plan and when God shut it down, they made a different plan! They weren't paralyzed by fear. They did not sit and wait in one place for God to give them direction. They **MOVED FORWARD**. And when God stopped their plans again, **THEY CONTINUED MOVING**. They made their way to Troas and their God did give them clear direction, and I am sure that if he hadn't, they would have continued trying to find places to preach the gospel.

We must make plans, we must take initiative, but we must be willing to submit our plans to the Spirit. Peterson is once again helpful here. He writes "In conclusion, it ought to be said that the narrative stretching from 15:36 to 16:10 shows both the importance and the limitation of human initiative in Christian work."⁴

In Acts 15 we saw the initiative of the Apostles and elders as they made plans to disperse the verdict of the Jerusalem council to the churches. Here, in Acts 16, we see the limitation of our planning. These same Apostles made wise, gospel centered, plans and the Spirit guided them elsewhere.

So, these last two principles go together: we must be willing to make plans and we must hold these plans loosely, so that we might surrender them to the Spirit's leading if need be.

⁴ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 456.

The Fourth and final principle we see in this text for positioning ourselves to receive the Spirit's guidance is to:

4. Seek Godly Counsel

This principle is demonstrated in this story in the fact that verse 10 records that "And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately WE sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them." Notice that word right in the middle there. Immediately WE sought to go into Macedonia. The Apostle Paul brought this vision to the group and they decided as a group on what was the best way to receive this vision.

Notice also that Luke changes from third person to first person. This is where Luke joined Paul and Silas on their journey for a time. That's just a fun thing to notice.

The main point here is that Paul received this vision and then he discussed it with his peers, and they came to a conclusion about what it meant TOGETHER. Paul didn't come to his own conclusion and force it upon his peers, neither did he leave them and do his own thing. The principle that is being demonstrated here is that we are better able to properly understand and follow the guiding of the Holy Spirit when we discuss it with other Christians.

It is wise and beneficial to seek advice and confirmation from mature believers when we think the Holy Spirit might be leading us one way or another.

I experienced this personally in my own call to ministry. I grew up going to summer camp every summer and as a teenager I had the opportunity to participate in multi-week Leadership Training programs through my summer camp. Very quickly the other people in my leadership training group nicknamed me pastor Scott. I had found that I naturally rose to leadership and teaching positions at camp and also at school. When I graduated high school, I did not immediately pursue ministry as I was not sure that is what I was called to do. After a couple of years of construction and some personal struggles and growth I began to feel a call to ministry. It felt as if God was leading me and calling me to ministry. This sense of calling continued to grow in me, but I did not want to assume that I had interpreted it correctly. So, I spoke to my pastor at the time about it and he spent time with me and gave me opportunities to teach and preach. I spoke with him and

other leaders at the Church about my sense of call and the experiences I had growing up. They affirmed my calling and gifting and recommended that I pursue formal theological education. It was through conversations with these older Godly men that I was able to confirm what I felt the Holy Spirit was calling me to.

Without their input I am not sure I would have ever had the confidence or certainty to begin Bible college.

Christians are created for each other. We are meant to be in community. It is perfectly fitting, therefore, that the Holy Spirit leads and guides us best when we are working together. There is a reason we have a board of Elders and not just one person running the show. We saw the benefit of this in Acts 15 as the Apostles and Elders came together to make one of the most important theological decisions ever made. Consider what they say in their letter to the Churches. “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements:” (Acts 15:28 ESV)

The Holy Spirit guided these men to their conclusion as they worked TOGETHER.

Similarly, friends, if you think the Holy Spirit is opening certain doors in your life, or if you think he may be shutting them. Talk to other mature believers about it. Seek the input of those whom you know love the Lord and love you.

Obviously, this is not a fool-proof approach. There is no 100% guarantee that you and those you trust will make every decision correctly. Remember that Paul and Silas got it wrong twice before the Spirit led them to Macedonia. Community and fellowship do not guarantee that we will be led by the Spirit. As we said at the beginning, there is no step-by-step instruction manual for making sure we are always in step with the Spirit.

These principles simply help position us in a place where we are better equipped to notice the promptings and guidance of the Holy Spirit. And they help prepare us to be able to respond appropriately to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. By ensuring that our desires and priorities are in line with Word of God, by making plans accordingly and holding them loosely, and by being in regular fellowship and discussion with other believers we can be better positioned, as

individuals, but also a Church body to be led by the Holy Spirit into fruitful gospel ministry. Paul and Silas' submission to the Spirit's guidance led to major Gospel growth and the planting of many more Churches for the Glory of God.

Friends the overarching will of God for our lives is clear. Jesus commands his disciples in Matthew 28 saying "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18b-20 ESV)

Listen to that last line again.

"behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

This is why Jesus ascended. To send the Spirit that he might be with each and every one of us at all times. We have the promise and the security of the Holy Spirit. We are not doing this on our own. We saw that this morning. We have seen a powerful example of how the Spirit moves to bring about Gospel fruitfulness in the Church. And we have seen principles that help us to receive and respond to the Spirit. By God's grace we can position ourselves to be mighty instruments in God's hands.

Let's pray together.