



AUGUST 1, 2021 | REV. MINHONG

“More Lessons from the Antioch Church” (Acts 13:1-3)

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

The long pandemic has had profound impact in our spiritual life. I want to draw your attention to two areas of Christian life that have been affected a lot by the pandemic.

First, our worship life. Moving from in-person worship to online worship, we managed to find a substitute during the unstable time. Online worship is far better than not having any worship at all. However, we all realize its limitations. Online service just does not bring out the same level of passion and anticipation as in-person worship does.

Some say hybrid worship is the way of future, but I do not think it is a good idea. We should try to recover in-person worship as much as possible. Can you imagine if we settle with online worship as a way of life? What impact will this have on our children’s spirituality?

Second, our passion for world mission has substantially diminished. For two summers in a row, we cancelled most of our travels abroad. No summer mission teams have gone out. We feel disconnected with the missionaries and the mission fields we have gone many times before. Most of all, I am concerned that we do not take the Great Commission as seriously as before, or at least, it does not come to us with the same kind of urgency as before.

So, we have the tall order of recovering what we have lost. We need to get back to passion worship and passion service for world missions. Worship and mission are what the church is all about!

In times like this, we need a motivation. We need a role model for what a proper church should look like. Let us learn from the Antioch Church (we looked at it two weeks ago) about how the Holy Spirit leads and guides the church. During this difficult time of the pandemic, we need to rely on the Holy Spirit more than ever. Let me share three important points about the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the church.

First, the Spirit prompts God’s people to share the Gospel.

We see the evidence of this statement from the Antioch Church. We know how this church came into being. It was all by the prompting work of the Spirit.

The Spirit was totally in charge when the Jerusalem church started. In Acts 2, the Spirit came upon the believers and that is how the Jerusalem church began.



The church grew in thousands in no time. Everyone in Jerusalem knew about this. But the church was shaken up when one of their leaders Stephen was stoned to death by an angry mob. A great persecution against the believers followed, and the disciples could no longer stay safely in Jerusalem. They had to run for their lives.

As they move away from Jerusalem, abandoning their homes and properties, the believers continue to share the Gospel with people they meet on the road.

¹⁹Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. ²⁰Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

Notice in vs. 19, how some people were going through Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch and preaching only to Jews. The disciples were Jews, and they were sharing the good news to Jews only. It is the most natural way of evangelism as Jews only associated with other Jews in those days, but in vs. 20 we learn that some people from Cyprus and Cyrene took the courage to share the good news with non-Jews (Gentiles) in Antioch. This was a very unconventional, counter-cultural thing to do, as far as they were concerned. A paradigm shift has taken place!

I have a question for all of you.

Who gave them this idea and permission to share the good news to the gentiles?

The book of Acts gives us the answer right at the beginning. In Acts 1:8, we read,

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Jesus told them clearly that when the Spirit came to them, they would be leaving Jerusalem and eventually go to the ends of the earth. Well, the Holy Spirit came to them, and they were not moving at all. They were somehow content just to be in Jerusalem. And in the meantime, the church kept growing big.

So, when the Jerusalem church did not take the command of Acts 1:8 seriously, the Spirit took over. The church went through a severe persecution, and the Spirit made sure that the members were all scattered to all of Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth!

That is why when some people went to Antioch, they were compelled to share the Gospel with Gentiles. It was the Spirit who did the prompting.

We must remember that the same Spirit who led the believers in the early Jerusalem Church is present in our midst. He is still leading God's people to do the work of God.

We must open our hearts and minds to the work of the Holy Spirit. He speaks to us and He prompts our hearts to follow Him.



Second, the Spirit gives direction to the church for the work of the Gospel.

No matter how difficult life is, we must remember that the Spirit always leads the church to do God's work. The Spirit remind them of what their primary mandate is, to worship the living God, and to share the Gospel with unbelievers so that they can also worship God (mission). These two aspects of church life must be restored.

Let us see now how the Spirit spoke to the Antioch church. Let us first pay attention to who the leaders are in the church. In verse 1, we have five leaders of the Antioch church:

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.

Let us examine each leader's cultural background briefly.

- Barnabas - 'Son of encouragement.' He is the one who introduced Saul (Paul) to the apostles in Jerusalem when Paul went through a radical transformation on the road to Damascus.
- 'Simeon called Niger' - perhaps from [central] Africa.
- Lucius of Cyrene – someone from north Africa
- Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) – this means that he was familiar with the royal class, unlike the lifestyle of common people.
- Saul – a strict Pharisee background but brought as a diaspora Jew in Tarsus.

You can appreciate how culturally diverse the leadership team was at Antioch, and together they were very open to the work of the Spirit.

They come together in worship and listen to the Spirit's voice. This is a beautiful thing and such a sight to behold!

The believers were so mature, and they desired to listen to the Spirit speak. They prepared themselves in fasting and prayer.

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So, after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

While the Antioch church might have had a different plan (to remain stable and continue to grow in number), the Spirit was the one that directed the church's future. The Spirit asked the leaders to release Barnabas and Saul 'for the work to which I have called them.'

We know that this work was going to be Paul's first, second, and third missionary journeys. The Antioch church became Paul's mission base in between the trips and the church members provided Paul with much support and love.

From hindsight, we recognize how strategic this move was (as the Spirit orchestrated). There were still so many places and peoples to go to and share the Gospel with. We see the Spirit directing the Jerusalem church (as a way of persecution) and the Antioch church (as a way of ordering the release of two key leaders).

Let us not make any mistake about it. It is the Spirit who guides and directs the church for the work of the Gospel.



The Spirit orchestrates God's people for the work of the Gospel.

Does the Spirit still direct the churches today, especially during the time of the pandemic? What do you think? What do you believe?

What does the Spirit think about us being content with online worship and slowly settling into some hybrid spirituality (a mix of online and offline activities)?

What does the Spirit have to say to us who are losing passion over world missions? Does His heart ache for our lack of response?

There are some things that we at City on a Hill can get out of this passage.

- We, too, need to listen to the Spirit's leading. For this to happen we need to be in prayer and fasting. That means no easy or hasty decisions until we feel totally led by the Spirit. The Spirit's presence is always marked by a sense of peace and purpose, not by anxious thoughts or feelings.
- We, too, need to be obedient to the Spirit's leading. Whether leaving or staying, we must seek God's Kingdom first. It is not about how I feel about things, but it is all about how the Spirit wants to place me in the most strategic place for the work of the Gospel.
- We, too, need to cherish partnership and seek cooperation for the Kingdom work just as Paul and Barnabas enjoyed their relationships with the Antioch church in the following mission trips.

Some of us are called to start a new church. I pray that you will rely on the leading of the Spirit completely. Listen to His voice. Ask what He desires from you, and how He wants to use you for the work of the Gospel.

Some others are called to remain and continue to engage in the work of the Gospel in partnership with the Korean-speaking congregation. There will be more opportunities to work with other brothers and sisters in Christ. Sometimes, a mission team can be formed out of two ministries. Sometimes, a life group will have a joint fellowship with a similar group (in age and life stage). Sometimes, there will be a joint worship. All this will happen while respecting the boundaries of each ministry's needs and contexts.

In the end, we want to function as a better community ready to take the Gospel in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

May the Lord bless you all.

Let's pray.