

The Great Stories of the Early Church
57-Paul and Silas 08
Amphipolis, Apollonia, and Thessalonica
Why One and Not the Other?
The Leadership of the Spirit
Acts 17:1-10

Acts 17:1-10

- 1 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews:
- 2 And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures,
- 3 Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ.
- 4 And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few.
- 5 But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar, and assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people.
- 6 And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also;
- 7 Whom Jason hath received: and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus.
- 8 And they troubled the people and the rulers of the city, when they heard these things.
- 9 And when they had taken security of Jason, and of the other, they let them go.
- 10 And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews. KJV

Introduction:

Have you noticed that since leaving Troas the missionary group has passed through six cities and only stopped at two? Leaving Troas they had traveled through Samothracia and Neapolis before stopping at Philippi and now they have passed by Amphipolis and Apollonia but stopped at Thessalonica. Have you ever wondered about that? Questioned it? The group was apparently following the coastline since Amphipolis was about 30 miles from Philippi to the south and Apollonia was a little further down the coast, about 30 miles from Thessalonica. But these were not villages. Both cities were large and important in their time and it is significant that they were passed over by the group.

On the surface reading it seems that Luke explained the stop at Thessalonica as being because there was a synagogue there but remember, there had been no synagogue at Philippi. So, we are back to the question, why pass through four cities and stop at these two?

If we go back to the days before the direction of God to come to Macedonia we see other similar

incidents only there it is plainly stated that the Holy Spirit hindered and prevented them from preaching the gospel in certain places.

Acts 16:6-8

- 6 Now when they had gone throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia, and were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia,
- 7 After they were come to Mysia, they assayed to go into Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not.
- 8 And they passing by Mysia came down to Troas. KJV

Now we know that Paul will visit Asia, at least Ephesus at some point but he was hindered initially, and that by God Himself.

There are those who believe that the Great Commission is a blanket command to go to any place that one can physically go and proclaim God's Word. The example that we are seeing, however, seems to tell a different story. It seems to say that the man who goes with the gospel is to be under the influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit so that he can understand that some places are open and some are closed. Some are closed now but will be open later as in the case of Ephesus, which was located in Asia, the area forbidden for the moment to Paul and his crew.

Talking about this kind of leadership by the Spirit makes many people, especially many Baptists, uncomfortable. They react as if one were promoting the Charismatic movement or something like it. So, the question rests before us. Is the one going with the message on a blanket mission or are there specific guidances that the Spirit of God grants?

If one goes and it is not the leadership of the Spirit, can he presume upon the provision and help of God there, or..... ? One can only guess at what might have been the outcome if Paul and Silas had decided to focus on Amphipolis or Apollonia rather than Thessalonica. What do you think? Would the results have been the same? Would there have been a massive interest like there was at Thessalonica?

Does the Holy Spirit go ahead of the missionary when the thing is done right and prepare audiences for him or does he allow the missionary to do the choosing?

Is it too radical to think that one might seek this kind of leadership from God?

Let me share with you what some others have said.

Gaebelein, Arno. Commentary on Acts (Kindle Locations 3581-3585). Titus Books. Kindle Edition.

“But the Holy Spirit had His own time and ways for giving the Gospel to these provinces. This shows clearly that the Holy Spirit must guide and direct in service. How He arrested the messengers and suffered them not to proceed is not stated. They followed His guidance

obediently. How necessary it is for the servant of Christ, be he an evangelist or a teacher, to depend on the Holy Spirit for a direction! Waiting on the Lord and then to go forth guided by His Spirit is the true way of a successful ministry. He must point out the way and the places and the time when and where the precious Word is to be

“The servants of the Lord Jesus Christ ministering the Gospel and the Word in the end of this present evil age need the guidance of the Holy Spirit as much as the apostle in the beginning of the age. And the Holy Spirit is today the same as He was then, when He suffered them not to minister in Asia and in Bithynia. We also call attention to the true rendering “the Spirit of Jesus suffered them not.” The blessed Lord walked on earth in the power of the Spirit and now the same Spirit who led Him while on earth, leads and guides his own into service. In this action of the Holy Spirit He assumed once more His authority, which, as we saw, was not fully recognized in the beginning of the second missionary journey, as He was recognized when Paul went forth the first time. He had to be held back from going in self-choosing to places which were not then to be visited. Thus kept back from ministry in Bithynia they turned towards the seacoast and came to Troas. This seaport was located opposite the European Continent and Macedonia was the nearest province. Not permitted to preach in Asia, held back from ministry in Bithynia, a double course was open to the apostle, either to go back to Antioch or to cross over to Europe.”

Ryrie, Charles C.. Acts of the Apostles- Everyman's Bible Commentary (Everyman's Bible Commentaries) (Kindle Locations 905-907). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

“After preaching in Phrygia and Galatia, the group tried to go into Asia Minor but were forbidden by the Spirit. So they turned north to Bithynia but were again prevented by the Spirit. So they awaited further leading from the Lord in Troas, Asia needed the Gospel, but this was not God's time. *Need did not constitute their call. They had just come from the east; they had been forbidden to go south or north, but they did not presume that the Lord was leading them to the west – they waited His specific directions. Logic alone is not the basis for a call. It was at Troas, near the site of ancient Troy, that the Lord gave them that specific leading through the vision of the man of Macedonia.*

from Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: New Modern Edition, Electronic Database. Copyright (c) 1991 by Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.

Acts 16:6-15

“2. They were forbidden at this time to preach the gospel in Asia (the country properly so called), *because it did not need, other hands being at work there; or because the people were not yet prepared to receive it, as they were afterwards* (Acts 19:10), when all those that dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord; or, as Dr. Lightfoot suggests, because at this time Christ would employ Paul in a piece of new work, which was to preach the gospel to a Roman colony at Philippi, for hitherto the Gentiles to whom he had preached were Greeks. The Romans were more particularly hated by the Jews than other Gentiles; their armies were the abomination of desolation; and therefore there is this among other things extraordinary in his call thither that he is forbidden to preach the gospel in Asia and other places, in order to his preaching it there,

which is an intimation that the light of the gospel would in aftertimes be directed more westward than eastward. It was the Holy Ghost that forbade them, either by secret whispers in the minds of both of them, which, when they came to compare notes, they found to be the same, and to come from the same Spirit; or by some prophets who spoke to them from the Spirit. The removals of ministers, and the dispensing of the means of grace by them, are in a particular manner under a divine guidance and direction. We find an Old-Testament minister forbidden to preach at all (Ezek 3:26): Thou shalt be dumb. But these New-Testament ministers are only forbidden to preach in one place, while they are directed to another where there is more need.

“3. They would have gone into Bithynia, but were not permitted: the Spirit suffered them not, v. 7. They came to Mysia, and, as it should seem, preached the gospel there; for though it was a very mean contemptible country, even to a proverb (Mysorum ultimus, in Cicero, is a most despicable man), yet the apostles disdained not to visit it, owning themselves debtors both to the wise and to the unwise, Rom 1:14. In Bithynia was the city of Nice, where the first general council was held against the Arians; into these countries Peter sent his epistle (1 Peter 1:1); and there were flourishing churches here, for, though they had not the gospel sent them now, they had it in their turn, not long after. Observe, Though their judgment and inclination were to go into Bithynia, yet, having then extraordinary ways of knowing the mind of God, they were overruled by them, contrary to their own mind. We must now follow providence, and submit to the guidance of that pillar of cloud and fire; and, if this suffer us not to do what we assay to do, we ought to acquiesce, and believe it for the best. The Spirit of Jesus suffered them not; so many ancient copies read it. *The servants of the Lord Jesus ought to be always under the check and conduct of the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, by whom he governs men's minds.*”

If you noticed the words of the three writers you saw that there is a difference in how they understand the words to apply to us but they all understand that the Spirit was guiding the choices the apostles made on the field. God was directing the steps of His servants and there was a plan to His direction which they could not see as they followed it. Some places were open for ministry and some were closed to them. One can rest assured that had they forced the issue there would have been little, if any, result. The Spirit is not inclined to work in power when men refuse to follow His leadership. Without doubt this is one of the greatest hindrances to any powerful workings of the Spirit in our day.

And then there are those who think that the Holy Spirit no longer leads people in any direct way today, that all of that is ceased. We see in the words of Matthew Henry that he tended to think that way, “We must now follow providence, and submit to the guidance of that pillar of cloud and fire; and, if this suffer us not to do what we assay to do, we ought to acquiesce, and believe it for the best.” But that is not, by far, the opinion of most Evangelical folks, even some very sound writers. Most all of us believe that there is a more direct and intimate direction of the Spirit in our lives, particularly in the really large decisions we must make in the service of God.

To be sure the Charismatic movement has brought this idea into dispute by the outlandish interpretations and displays that they have brought into the realm of Christianity. And many who have been touched in one way or another by this movement have come to have high skepticism concerning anything supernatural that one might claim to have experienced. Yet, the Holy Spirit is still with us and the promise is as well.

John 14:16-18

16 And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever;

17 Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.

18 I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. KJV

John 15:26-27

26 But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me:

27 And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning. KJV

John 16:13-14

13 Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.

14 He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you. KJV

Just as the apostles could not function except by the leadership of the Spirit, neither can we. There are things we cannot understand and problems we cannot solve except by His enabling... and He does enable His people to do that which He has called them to do when they look to Him for that enabling, otherwise known as 'Grace.'

One question we might ask is this, "why would we be given such a story if the Spirit was not going to operate in some similar way going forward?" Only to tell us of a strange work which God did once and with only some people never to be repeated? Does the book of Acts tell us what to expect in the Work of God or only describe a delicious set of experiences which is forever banned to us? Have you ever thought of that?

Historically the church has always looked to the Lord to guide in times of distress and decision and often He has answered by wonderful and strange means. Martin Lloyd-Jones has a wonderful message on Rom 8:16 that you should hear in which he documents strange workings of God in the lives of men committed to the principles of the Sovereignty of God.

Rom 8:16 The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: KJV

At one point he quoted Charles Haddon Spurgeon to say this, "God has a way of speaking without the Word, and without the ministers, to our hearts. His Spirit can drop like the rain and distil like the dew, as the small rain upon the tender herb. We know not how it is, but sometimes there is a deep, sweet calm."

Many have allowed themselves to be driven from any concept of the Spirit's direct working in the souls of the saints because of the excesses, errors, and heresies we have seen over the last 100 years but the saints of old had no such qualms and sought diligently for the leading of the Spirit of God upon their lives to direct them where they ought to go and keep them from places where they were not authorized by the Spirit to be.

Why would Jesus teach us in the Lord's Prayer to say, "lead me," if there was coming a time when there was no leadership of the Spirit except through the Word and the circumstances of life (providence)? And, beside that, where is the scripture that teaches us to stop expecting the Spirit of God to give direct leadership to His people? The idea is quite preposterous.

Now, that being said, let me qualify it in this way. In general and for the most part it is only the mature believer who is able to sort out all of the different inputs into his mind and hear the voice of God above the others. Secondly, the Spirit often comes, as He did to Ezekiel, in a "still, small voice." We spend all of our conscious hours with input constantly streaming into our minds either from the television, the radio, the internet, or from some audio equipment in our home or car. We couldn't hear a still small voice if it was shouting at us. Generally speaking the direction of God comes to the one who has learned to quiet his soul before God and listen for what God is saying. He isn't going to shout over the TV most of the time unless He is declaring discipline upon us for being voluntarily deaf.

If you want to hear from God, learn to quiet your soul, learn to commune with God, learn to long for the good things of God, obey what He tells you, and be faithful to what you know is right and true.

I will say this. God's specific guidance should not be sought in the ordinary things of life.

When the alarm goes off, it is time to get up and get to work.

When the fuel gauge in the car reads 1/4 tank, it is time to buy more gasoline.

When the electricity bill comes in the mail it is time to pay it.

When the church meets you are to be there if at all able.

These are not things where we need special guidance from God and life after life has proven that seeking the will of God concerning things where we should already know the answer most often proves to be a disaster.

So, how does God lead?

Sometimes, though rarely, He has spoken to the best of His servants as He did to Jesus at His baptism, to Peter at the Mount of Transfiguration, to Paul on the Road to Damascus and Moses at Sinai. It is doubtful if this will be repeated. If you are looking for voices from heaven, I doubt that you are going to hear anything from God in that way.

Other times in the early church God would speak through someone who had the gift of prophecy and give direct information that was then used in His service.

Acts 11:28-30

28 And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar.

29 Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief

unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea:
30 Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.
KJV

But most agree that this office of prophecy has ceased since the First Century so I would not recommend going to anyone who claims to have direct revelations from heaven for you. Everyone so far has found it to be a fruitless, if not dangerous, endeavor. I say 'dangerous' because some have fallen under demonic oppression after having sought such people out.

Sometimes God has spoken to people in visions as He did to Paul at Troas, communicating to him the call to Macedonia. Again, this type of interaction seems to have ceased, though some contend that it remains. I am highly skeptical of information that has a vision as its source.

Most often, at least in our day, God 'leads' His people through difficult decisions by giving either a sense of confirmation than one of the options under consideration is more desirable than the others and has His blessing. At other times He has been known to give His servant a serious cases of uneasiness about a matter and that has been taken as His communication that the option is inappropriate.

Then, there are those desperate times when we have prayed and received nothing that we can interpret as direct leadership and we are forced to look to the development of circumstances as our guide, trusting that God is controlling the outcome of all things to give us confidence either to press forward or to turn in a different direction.

In all issues of leadership extreme care is always to be exercised. As I said before, maturity is needed in deciphering the will of God from what seems to be leadership. We are extremely susceptible to deception and especially when we really desire one matter over the other naturally. The leadership of God often leads against our wills and into places we would not naturally choose to go. All of this requires the mature soul to be able to decipher one from the other and sometimes even to choose not to make a decision when the Will of God is truly not clear.

That all being said, we need God's leadership in our lives, particularly at crucial junctions where the future of our life might be changed by a wrong choice.

Paul learned to hear the voice of God and was ready to obey it even though it led him past mission fields that looked ripe for the harvesting.

One of the writers I quoted, Charles Ryrie, made a couple of really good observations. Neither *need* no *logic* can be seen as God's call. So many have made that error to their own hurt and to the failure of missions in which other invested heavily.

Our first and primary guide must be the Word of God. His Spirit is never going to lead us to do anything contrary to the commands and guidances that we find there.

He is never going to lead us to a partner in life that is forbidden to us by scripture.

He is never going to lead us to an understanding of scripture that is totally new and novel.

He is never going to lead us to be dishonest in the pursuit of a goal.

He is never going to lead us to blasphemy, idolatry, witchcraft, or any pursuit of religion

contrary to that which He has given us in His Word, the true church.

On and on we could go. Almost every circumstance of life can find guidance from His Word. Yet, there are those rare cases that sometimes come along only once or twice in a lifetime, a choice between two good things which seem to have almost equal appeal yet cannot both be chose and which will change our life. For those we need help and sometimes the only help we can find is the guidance of the Spirit of God.

When you find yourself in such a place I would make the following recommendations.

Establish or re-establish absolutely communion with God in which you have confidence.

Lay your case before Him and appeal for His help.

Wait diligently and patiently for His answer.

Dare not rush the process or make the decision without something concrete that you can attribute to nothing but His leadership.

Once you have His answer follow it even if His prompting leads you down the path least profitable physically. It will be rewarding spiritually and that will be enough.