

Following the Spirit

Acts 13:13-43

Read Acts 13:13-43 (if you think you have time, read from verse 1)

1. What does the phrase “following the Spirit” mean to you? Is it something you desire? What does or might it look like in your own life?

This is a question to get the ball rolling. It may initiate very diverse perspectives so if you are aware of possible problems in your group you may want to skip the question or be prepared to limit time on it.

2. Once Barnabas and Saul were set apart by the Spirit for their mission (vs 2) how did they make their ministry decisions? (vs 4; vs 13; vs 14; 15:36-40)

Vs 4 - they went to the native region of Barnabas, a place and culture with which he was familiar. **Vs 13** - As Paul took a leadership role they moved on to Asia Minor & the Greco-Roman world with which Paul was familiar. **And** John Mark left the group and returned to Jerusalem, which was a result of and/or the cause of deep personality conflict. **Vs 14** - They moved on to Pisidian Antioch with no record of any missionary efforts & some commentators suggest that this move was made for health reasons. **And** on the Sabbath they were in the Synagogue at least in part because this was what they always did as devout practicing Jews. **15:36-40** - Jumping ahead in the story, when Barnabas wanted John Mark to rejoin their company Paul refused and the two, who had been called by the Spirit as a team, permanently parted company & Barnabas & John Mark returned to Cyprus while Paul & Silas revisited cities in Asia Minor.

3. What take-aways for our lives were highlighted in the sermon? They seem a bit contradictory. How can we hold them together?

On the one hand, the chapter begins with prayer & fasting and our takeaway is not to rush ahead of the Spirit. “One of the key points of Paul’s summary of God’s dealings with Israel is that the outworking of God’s good purposes takes time - sometimes a LOT of time - generations, even centuries.... So the community of believers in Antioch waited before the Lord in fasting & prayer until Barnabas & Saul were named by the Spirit and then commissioned & sent off by the leaders.”

On the other hand, having been picked by the Spirit, Barnabas and Paul seemed to make their way in ministry by heading to familiar, logical places, possibly making decisions based on physical health and long-developed habit - and engaged in alienating personality conflict.

We hold these things together by committing ourselves, our gifts, and our decisions to the glory of God and the blessing of those around us. We precede any significant choice or endeavour with patient waiting, with prayer and fasting. Then, reasonably confident that our will is conformed to God's will, we live our lives and make our choices (and take responsibility for them) believing that the Spirit is in the midst of it all and God's work will be done. An example not used in the sermon is that of grocery shopping: we don't need to wait for the Spirit to tell us to go shopping - our empty fridge will tell us that. But we can go shopping open to the possibility of a Spirit-led and orchestrated encounter with someone (fellow-shopper or cashier, etc) along the way.

4. What do we think happens to the Spirit's leading when we choose badly (see especially 15:36-40)?

We might be tempted to think that if the Spirit is leading us in one direction and we choose to the contrary that we will have left the Spirit and even that we have been disqualified from ministry/service because of our sinful and alienating choice(s). But in our story it is quite clear that the Spirit was very much with them - with John Mark, without John Mark, and even after this team, chosen by the Spirit as a team, split irrevocably and went their separate ways.

5. Was the stained glass analogy helpful in trying to express how who we are as people works together with the leading of the Holy Spirit?

"The more powerfully the sunlight shines through the glass the more brightly its colour is displayed. But it never stops being that colour.

"Likewise, the more brightly the light of Jesus (the Holy Spirit) shines through us the more brightly our colour - our character - will shine. Our task, then, is to persist in being oriented toward the light - toward Jesus - that the light might more fully and effectively shine into - and then through us to the world around us. When we abandon ourselves to God and God's calling on our lives, when we choose to decrease that He might increase, when we choose the way of the cross, the way of self-sacrifice, we will not

disappear. Rather we will shine with a new - or rather a borrowed radiance that we never could have imagined and never saw coming."

6. Do you believe that we are a radiant people and that you are a part of that radiance?

This is an opportunity to explore how we see ourselves and our place in God's work in the world. There are at least 2 reasons why we often are unaware of how the Spirit works (shines) through us as a blessing and benefit to others. One is that we are protected from seeing it to keep us from the deadly sin of spiritual pride. The other is that there is a spiritual blindness imposed on us for spiritually dark reasons, because if many of us saw how the Spirit of God was working through us for the blessing of others and to fulfil our role in God's great work of the reconciliation and restoration of all of creation, we would throw ourselves into that with awe, wonder and profound gratitude.