

Acts

Acts 13:1-13 - Clues on how the Holy Spirit works

Acts 12 marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry going worldwide, **powered by the Holy Spirit**, just as Jesus promised in Acts 1:8. But how did the church know what methods and strategies the Holy Spirit would use? How did they know the difference between the Spirit guiding them and their own ideas? And how did they recognize the direction that the Spirit wanted them to take? Was it by the Spirit speaking personally to them through voices in their heads, or through special revelations? But how did they know it was the Spirit?

Acts 13 can offer us some useful clues, because this is the point when the Holy Spirit kicks into high gear for spreading the good news about Jesus through the church to the whole world. **We get to see very clearly, then, how the Spirit works**, and in particular from this time on, beginning in the church at Antioch, **verse 1**, where there are "prophets and teachers." The Greek text identifies three of them as prophets - Barnabas, Symeon called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and two of them as teachers, Manaen - who'd been in the court of King Herod (the Herod of Jesus' day) - and Saul of Tarsus, who would later become Paul the apostle.

So the first thing we learn is that the Spirit gives abilities to people, and to a wide range of people too. Barnabas was a Jew from Cyprus, Symeon was probably a black man from Nigeria, and Lucius of Cyrene, also in Africa, was possibly a black man too. Manaen was an aristocrat in high society, who along with Saul had a great gift for teaching the Scriptures. All these men had been equipped with gifts by the Spirit for a purpose and the needs of that time.

The second thing we learn is that the Spirit enabled these men to work together, despite their vastly different backgrounds and personalities, because in **verse 2** we find all five of them "worshipping the Lord and fasting" together. They were seeking direction from the Spirit first, rather than zooming off in all directions to preach to the Gentiles. And it was while they were in this seeking and waiting frame of mind that "the Holy Spirit said..."

How the Spirit spoke we don't know from this verse, but we do know these men were together for a purpose, to put all else aside, including food, to seek the Spirit's direction on how on earth they're going to reach out to all the Gentiles too. But they knew from Acts 12 that earnest prayer got answers.

The answer soon came too, because in **Acts 13:2** the Spirit was able to communicate to them, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

This is the third thing we learn about the Spirit, that he has a very specific plan in mind, he knows exactly the people he wants to put that plan into action through, and it’s very personal too. He says, “Set apart for me.” This is not just orders from on high in some cold, demanding tone; this is God and humans working in close partnership together, **making communication easy**. God never intended to make communication between us difficult, or communicating his will hard for us to figure out. As Paul says later in Acts 17:27, God is “not far from each one of us,” and in reaching out to him we’ll find him, which is exactly what happened here in Acts 13. And it needed to happen too, because the church had a huge job in a tough, confusing world, so they were in constant need of guidance, wisdom and answers from the Spirit.

As a church, then, or as individuals, if we’re unsure of God’s will in our lives, we can reach out to him and he’ll communicate an answer. And by the same method too: First, he makes the need clear, then he inspires us to pray (and fast too if the need is really pressing), and then he has us trusting him while waiting for an answer. And then an answer comes. The church in Acts 13 knew, for instance, that the Spirit had chosen and equipped Barnabas and Saul. And all of them had no problem seeing it too, because in **verse 3**, “after they had fasted and prayed, they (the church) placed their hands on Barnabas and Saul and sent them off.”

Notice how they all saw it and agreed? I’ll take that as another clue, then, in how the Spirit communicates his will: it’s when a group seeking his direction comes to the same conclusion. They can all see the obvious thing to do. And how many times have we experienced that, where we start off with no clue what to do, but find ourselves in our helplessness turning to the Holy Spirit for help, and gradually, or speedily, an answer is given that’s obvious to us all? The Spirit gets an answer to us. Call it speaking or communicating, the Spirit will answer, because this is how things work now in the church.

But also notice who the Spirit communicates with. It’s with those who are interested in what the church has been called to do, who automatically seek his help when unsure of what direction the Spirit’s taking them, and they happily pray knowing the Spirit is listening and is more than willing to offer wisdom and guidance. It’s also with those who’ve caught on to how the Spirit works in the book of Acts, and are willing to try it out. Not because they have to, but because it’s obvious **how willing the Spirit is to communicate**.

And we learn something else about the Spirit in the next few verses too, because in **verse 4** Barnabas and Saul are “sent on their way by the Holy Spirit,” but the Spirit doesn’t give them a map. It’s up to Barnabas and Saul to choose where to go and by what route. It was also their choice to take a young apprentice, John Mark, with them (verse 5), which seemed like a good idea, Mark being Barnabas’ cousin and the son of a rich widow.

So there is lots of leeway given for human choice within the Spirit’s will. And the Spirit’s obviously fine with that. He doesn’t lock us in so tightly that we’re scared of making mistakes. It’s a case of “Go to it” and off we go in trust, as did Barnabas and Saul who decided Seleucia was a jolly good place to start and from there they’d sail to Cyprus - likely because Barnabas was from Cyprus and he had contacts there (verse 4). But they knew exactly what the Spirit wanted them to do once they got to Cyprus, and that was “proclaim the word of God,” **verse 5**, and proclaim it to the Jews too, because they knew it was the Spirit’s clearly spoken will in Acts 3:26 that the Jews came first.

So they hit the Jewish synagogues “through the whole island (from east to west) until they came to Paphos (the capital),” and that’s when, in **verses 6-7**, they “met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant (or spiritual advisor) to the pro-consul (governor of the island), Sergius Paulus (a pagan Roman).”

Somehow this Roman governor got wind of what Barnabas and Saul were preaching and teaching, and being “an intelligent man,” **verse 7**, he sent for the two men because “he wanted to hear the word of God” explained to him personally. So here’s a Gentile, and a highly influential and sharp-minded one too, out of the blue actually asking two Jews what God was all about. Could Barnabas and Saul have planned this any better, or even thought such a thing was possible? But this was another clue as to how the Spirit works; it’s in wonderful, exciting, and unexpected ways. It brings anticipation and joy to our lives when you never know what’s going to happen next, but knowing with the Spirit it will always be good.

It won’t always be easy, though, as we see in **verse 8**, because “Elymas (his Greek name) the sorcerer (magician in Greek) opposed them and tried to turn Sergius Paulus from the faith.” Note that Elymas was a Jew, whose Hebrew name, **Bar-Jesus**, meant “son of Jesus,” which in Hebrew culture meant he was a follower of Jesus. Not only was he cleverly disguising himself by his Greek name as a Greek, not a Jew, therefore, he was also disguising himself by his Hebrew name as a disciple of Jesus. And by means of magic he’d given the impression he was very spiritual too. This was one very cunning man.

But this is when **Saul became the apostle Paul, verse 9**, because “filled with the Holy Spirit” he “looked straight at Elymas and said (in **verse 10**), ‘You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right. You re full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?’” And then Paul did what only an apostle could do: with authority he told Elymas, “Now the hand of the Lord is against you (**verse 11**). You are going to be blind....And immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand.”

Paul had spoken with the same apostolic authority as Peter when Peter had also exposed Ananias and Sapphira as frauds and pretenders. And when Sergius Paulus saw what happened to Elymas, “he believed,” **verse 12**, because it confirmed what Saul and Barnabas were saying about Jesus (the same thing Peter had said back in Acts 10:34-43).

Right off the bat, then, in this first journey into the big, wide world, the Spirit quickly reveals the existence of people like Elymas, who claim they’re followers of Jesus, but in reality they’re puppets of the devil. The Spirit also reveals in **verse 10** how we can identify those who are “enemies of everything that is right,” because they “**pervert** the right ways of the Lord.” They’re aware of what’s right from God’s word, and even talk like they believe it, but they deliberately twist it in ways that turn people off, like people today preaching grace but adding the need to obey all sorts of church rituals too.

So the Spirit is all for us being able to identify a fake, because fake Christians can horribly mislead and misdirect good people like Sergius Paulus. But Sergius had one great thing going for him: he had a humble desire to learn. “He wanted to hear the word of God,” **verse 7**, and he was “amazed at the teaching about the Lord,” **verse 12**.

It’s interesting, then, that the Holy Spirit got to him. But this is how the Spirit works: he’s way ahead of us, and he sets things up wonderfully to meet the need, as he did through Saul who fearlessly stood up to Elymas, which in turn convinced Sergius Paulus who was speaking the truth and who was a fake.

And one last note in **verse 13**, that Saul is now Paul, and the leadership has switched to him. It’s no longer Barnabas and Saul, it’s now “Paul and his companions” who “sailed to Perga in Pamphylia.” And Barnabas must have accepted it, which again tells us how the Spirit works, that the Church recognizes and happily accepts who’s been gifted for the job in hand, which the Spirit confirms in ways that are obvious to all. What fun the Spirit must have, then, when we know how he works and we trust him.