

Acts

Acts 16:1-15 - How the Holy Spirit spreads the gospel

The first three verses in Acts 16 seem to contradict James' ruling in Acts 15 - that no Gentile needed to be a Jew first to become a Christian - because here's Paul having Timothy circumcised according to Jewish custom in **Acts 16:3**. So why on earth would Paul do that?

Well, on his last visit to Lystra Paul had seen something special in Timothy, likely only a teenager still, but Paul could see a gifted teacher in the making and he wanted to apprentice Timothy personally by having Timothy travel with him. There was a problem, though: Timothy was a Jew on his Mother's side, but she had never had him circumcised, which was a real "no, no" among Jews (Acts 15:1).

In Paul's mind, therefore, Timothy would have no credibility among the Jews whom God had sent Paul to preach to. And it certainly didn't fit in with Paul's own attitude in **1 Corinthians 9:22** either, that "I (Paul) have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some." In other words, it was Paul's notion that if he wanted to reach people with his message, he needed to take into account their history and respect their customs and rituals, and especially among the Jews. So, credit to both Timothy's willingness and Paul's very positive assessment of him, Timothy was circumcised.

But in Philippi, their next port of call in **Acts 16:12**, sensitivity to local customs and religious rituals would not be nearly enough to help ease the teaching of the gospel. The Philippians were a proud and arrogant people, having been honoured by the Roman Emperor, Augustus Caesar, when he'd officially made them Roman citizens for the aid the Philippians had given him in defeating Brutus and Cassius the murderers of Julius Caesar.

But it was to this proud and thoroughly pagan Roman city that the Holy Spirit had now taken Paul and his companions, having blocked them from preaching elsewhere in Turkey (verses 6-7). Add to that a vision Paul had of a man begging him to "Come to Macedonia and help us," and it became obvious to Paul that "God had called us to preach to them" (verses 9-10). So over the border into Europe the gospel went, for the first time in history. And what a moment that was, because from this point on the Western world would be turned upside down.

In World War 2 terms, this would be like the Allied invasion of Nazi-occupied France on D-Day in June 1944, which changed the course of the war and eventually led to Germany's defeat and surrender. Because in Christian terms Paul's "invasion" of Europe changed the course of Christianity too, and set the scene for all Christians in every age as to how the Holy Spirit spreads the gospel. It's another of those watershed chapters in Acts that we - as that same church today - can take huge encouragement from, because it shows us how the Holy Spirit operates in the church in all ages to turn our world upside down too. In other words, what happens next in Acts 16 applies just as vividly to us today as it did back then.

On that basis, then, the first thing we learn in Acts 16 is that the Holy Spirit makes it obvious which direction we need to go. How? By closing doors he doesn't want us going through, and opening doors that he does want us going through. And when Paul understood that he didn't try to push the closed doors open, he simply stepped through the open ones, and without hesitation too. He and his companions, Silas, Timothy and Luke, immediately "set sail, therefore, from Troas," **verse 11**, landing up in Philippi, the "leading city of that district of Macedonia," on the north eastern tip of Greece, in **verse 12**.

They were now standing on European soil as strangers in a pagan city, so where did they go from there? They went where the Holy Spirit directed them again, **to the most likely people who would listen to them**. Up to this point in other cities that would be the local Jewish synagogue, but in Philippi no such synagogue existed, meaning there weren't even ten male Jews in the entire city - ten being the minimum number needed for a synagogue. That being the case, **verse 13**, "we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer." They "expected" it because in Jewish tradition if there wasn't a synagogue in a town or city, they'd meet in a group somewhere outside the city on the Sabbath.

And true to what they were now learning to expect from the Holy Spirit, they found an open-minded audience, this time in a Jewish ladies' prayer group down by the river. Paul explained to them why he and his companions were in Philippi, to pass on the astounding news that their hopes as Jews of a Messiah coming to rescue them from evil oppression had been realized in Jesus, who'd clearly shown he was the Messiah by his remarkable miracles, and then had it confirmed by being brought back to life again three days after being killed.

But why would the Holy Spirit direct Paul to this tiny group of people, and especially when Paul, as an apostle, had been give such a huge calling by Jesus back in Acts 9:15?

Because there's a lesson here for all of us Christians in all ages as to how the Holy Spirit spreads the gospel. Up to this point in the book of Acts the Holy Spirit had given Paul and Barnabas the power to do "miraculous signs and wonders among the Gentiles" (Act 15:12) that had often resulted in huge numbers of both Jews and Gentiles responding to the gospel message (as in Acts 14:1 and 21). So it could seem like this was the only method the Holy Spirit had of spreading the gospel - through apostles travelling to major cities doing amazing miracles that grabbed people's attention.

But **how is that relevant to us in the church today** when we don't have apostles "speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders" (Acts 14:3)? And neither do we have the likes of an apostle Peter healing a paralytic bedridden for eight years, or raising a dead woman back to life again (in Acts 9:34 and 40). So it's not surprising that we aren't seeing huge numbers of people responding.

Has the Holy Spirit stopped working by that method then? But isn't the book of Acts showing us how the Holy Spirit works in all ages? Isn't what happened back then supposed to be a vivid example of what we can expect from the Holy Spirit today too? But how many apostles do we have - or does any church denomination have? The church back then also had "prophets and evangelists" as well as apostles (Ephesians 4:11), but how many of us in our little group are prophets and evangelists? How many of us are even interested in, or sense that, we too have a calling from God to preach the gospel in the streets and places where people gather like Paul and his companions did?

So how does the Holy Spirit spread the gospel through the likes of us, then? Through our example? Possibly, but how many people have you had tell you it's your example that got their attention and had them wanting to hear more about Jesus? And how many times have we been "invited to speak further" about Jesus, as they were in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13:42? Do we have too many fingers on just one hand to count the number of people who "heard" us and "were glad and honoured the word of the lord" as they did in Acts 13:48?

So how, may I ask, does the Holy Spirit spread the gospel and turn the world upside down through us in our little corner of the world, especially when we're taken up with jobs, family, house and garden needs, as well as ageing and health issues - just like most of the people we know too? They're in the same boat we are. Maybe you've wondered, then, as I have, "So, what, exactly, am I in the church for?" if no-one, even in my own family, shows any interest in what I believe? And yet here I am, gifted with the Holy Spirit to be a witness to the living Jesus. But how can I be that witness?

Well, back in Acts 16 we find Paul being guided by the Holy Spirit to meet with this little group of ladies, with one name in **verse 14** being singled out. Luke describes her this way: “One of those listening was Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God.” So Lydia, being a typical Jew, would have been at the synagogue if there was one. But here she is on a riverbank instead, listening to Paul, and really listening too, because Luke adds this intriguing statement at the end of verse 14: **“The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.”**

This is fascinating, because it’s the first time in the book of Acts we hear the Holy Spirit working this way. We know already that the Holy Spirit directs the apostles and others to the people most likely to listen, like the “God-fearing” Roman centurion Cornelius and his household, or the Ethiopian eunuch reading his Bible in a chariot, but never have we heard yet that the Holy Spirit personally opens someone’s heart so he or she responds to the gospel.

So again, this is new ground we’re treading and another watershed chapter in how the Holy Spirit spreads the gospel. It’s by enabling people to respond. Because in their response the gospel has spread, hasn’t it? It’s gained one more person. It may only be one person but it’s more than it was before. And all it needed was the person responding.

Can we apply this example today as well, then? Well, yes, because we don’t have apostles doing miracles spreading the gospel, and nor are we personally spreading the gospel by our preaching and teaching, or even by our example. But the gospel **HAS** spread through us simply in our response to it, and that was all that was needed, just our response.

And we didn’t do anything to create that response either. It happened to us. Up to that point we’d had no interest in the true gospel - maybe nibbled round it a bit while attending a church, but nothing in all those years really hit us as to what the gospel was really all about. But then suddenly, out of the blue, we heard or read what turned out to be the true gospel, and found ourselves immediately responding to it - and still responding too. It’s why we like being together and talking about it. And like Lydia we want the teachers of the true gospel to “come and stay” with us too (verse 15).

Because this too is how the Holy Spirit spreads the gospel, and especially through those like us who have no other way of spreading it. So if we ever feel discouraged that we aren’t doing anything to spread the gospel, it’s from Acts 16 that we realize **we already have**, and we still are spreading the gospel, by simply responding to it. And it’s all because the Spirit works this way too.