

Led By The Spirit – Acts 16: 1- 40

There is a phrase that is found in Acts Chapter 15, the chapter that Brian spoke about last week, that puzzles me. At the Jerusalem conference, the key leaders of the church got together to decide if Gentiles had to obey the laws of Moses, and the men to be circumcised in order to be followers of Jesus. All the heavyweights of the church were there. Paul, Barnabas, James, Peter and the apostles and the Elders of the church. After much discussion and debate, with arguments presented from both sides, they came to a decision that circumcision wasn't necessary. They decided to write a letter to the churches telling them of their decision. In that letter is the phrase that puzzles me. You can find it in Acts 15:28 ***"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..."*** I look at that and think – "Hey hang on. There is no mention of seeking the Lord, or prayer, or any sort of divine guidance from the Holy Spirit mentioned anywhere in that chapter. Shouldn't they have just said "it seemed good to us". Isn't it spiritualising it all a bit to say ***"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...?"***

I'm raising this question because Chapter 16 of Acts is an example of the sometimes convoluted way that God gets us to where he wants us to be. I know there are Christians today who talk about being led by the Spirit all the time. These people talk about having a constant hotline to God, and for them, discovering what God wants them to do and say is pretty easy. I'm not one of them. I suspect I'm not alone. I suspect there are many of you who want to do God's will, but you struggle to find out what it is. You are willing to go where he wants you to go, but the guidance isn't that clear. If you are like me, I think you are going to find this scripture today quite comforting. It tells of three spiritual heavyweights, Paul, Barnabas and Silas, who are seeking to be led by the Spirit. But you will see as we follow the story, that none of their guidance came easy. The very thing many of us struggle with, they struggled with too. I'm sure there were times when they asked themselves Is this the Spirit of God leading us, or are we just making dumb decisions? In one church where I was Pastor I had a woman come to me who was quite distraught. Her husband had been at a hyped up church meeting where people were being asked to lay everything on the altar for the Lord. He took off his wedding ring and put it in the offering plate. He did it because he wanted to dedicate his marriage to God. But his wife saw that act as a betrayal of their marriage vows. It caused a huge upset in their relationship, especially when the church concerned lost the wedding ring. How do we know when we are being led by the Spirit? Being led by the Spirit isn't as simple and easy as some people would have you believe. Not even giants of the faith like Paul and Barnabas could agree on what God's will was. Let's read from the end of Acts 15.

"Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches." (Acts 15:36 – 41 NIV)

Led By The Spirit About Taking Mark?

On their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas had taken Mark with them through Cyprus. But when they reached modern day Turkey, young Mark went home to his Mum in Jerusalem. On this second mission trip Barnabas wanted to take Mark with them. He saw Mark as a young guy who had panicked on the previous trip, who deserved another chance. What made it even more tricky was that Barnabas was Mark's cousin. Barnabas was on the side of grace. Give him another chance. He's young. He chickened out last time, but he will be OK this time. No way says Paul. It's going to be tough. Last time we got biffed out of cities where we preached. I got stoned and left for dead. If the last time is anything to go by, we are going to get fierce opposition to the gospel. The last thing I want is a young guy who can't hack the pace, who is going to run home to his Mum again. I need people who I can rely on. No way. He's not coming.

What happened? The NIV translates the Greek text diplomatically, saying they had a sharp disagreement. This was no disagreement. The Greek text tells us this was a huge row between Paul and Barnabas. It was a church bust up. It was the first recorded church split. Out of it came two missionary journeys rather than one. Barnabas and Mark went to Cyprus. Paul and Silas went on a new missionary journey. Were Paul and Barnabas led by the Spirit at this point? Probably not. Both of them in future would be able to say "See, I told you I was right". When things got tough on his missionary journey, Paul might say to himself "Oh I'm so glad I didn't bring Mark here". But then Mark turned out to be one of the key leaders of the church and the writer of one of the Gospels. Barnabas could well have said "See, I told you he was a good guy". Now there is no record in scripture of either Paul or Barnabas saying "I told you so." Paul was big enough later in his life to acknowledge Mark's worth and to acknowledge him as a colleague in mission. Sometimes people talk about being led by the Spirit as if they have a pipeline to heaven and they always get it right. We don't always get it right. When we get it wrong we should be big enough to admit it, and where necessary, ask for forgiveness and extend grace.

Here's the next scripture:

***"He came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers."* (Acts 16:1-5 NIV)**

Led By The Spirit In Choosing Timothy?

Timothy came with a good C.V. Other Christians spoke highly of him. With a mother who was Jewish, and a Greek father, he was an ideal candidate to join a mission team to Jews and Greeks. Paul wanted to take him along, but there was a problem. Timothy's Greek father hadn't had him circumcised as a baby. So Paul circumcised him. Now you are probably thinking "Hang on. Paul and Silas were part of the Jerusalem council that have just decided circumcision is no longer necessary to be a follower of Jesus, yet Paul circumcised Timothy. How can that be the leading of the Spirit?" Paul knew that a lot of their preaching was going to be in Jewish synagogues. If Timothy was going to be able to be accepted in synagogues to preach the gospel, he had to be circumcised. Led by the Spirit? I think so.

Lets read some more.

***"Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas."* (Acts 16:6-8 NIV)**

Led By The Spirit When Doors Shut In Your Face?

I wish the scriptures gave a bit more detail about how the Holy Spirit led them. But all the scriptures say is that the Holy Spirit told them not to preach the gospel in the Roman province of Asia, which is now the whole of modern western Turkey. They couldn't go west, so they went north. It was about a 3 week trek through tough and wild country. They didn't know where they were going. Their guidance at this point was more about where not to go than where to go. They got up to north west Turkey and concluded that God wanted them to go into the Roman province of Bithynia, on the south shore of the Black sea. Wrong again. Luke says ***"The Spirit of Jesus wouldn't let them"*** How did they know? Was it a prophecy? Was it a deep growing internal conviction? Did they discuss it and have a vote? If they couldn't go into Bithynia there was only one way left – down to the coast at Troas. But Troas was in the Roman province of Asia and they had been told not to preach there. How frustrating. The one place open to them, and they can't preach the gospel there. So far this missionary journey has produced a mighty great

argument, a bust up of the missions team, a trek through half of Turkey that has resulted in nothing but a whole lot of closed doors, finishing up in a place where they can't preach. And all through this they have been open to the Spirit leading them. Can you imagine the frustration? Have you been there done that? Have you walked in faith, trusting the Lord, believing that he has been leading you, and you have found yourself in a place that feels like a dead end? People, dead end places are not the final destination when the Spirit is leading us. We have to finish this story. We have to read on a little further.

“During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.” (Acts 16:9-10 NIV)

Led By The Spirit Into Europe.

Sometimes it's not until we have come to the point of frustration and despair that we hear the Lord clearly. The clearest guidance they got was after they had walked for weeks, achieving almost nothing. Then at their lowest point, at the port of Troas, the Spirit spoke in a way that was unmistakably clear. Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia – northern Greece – calling them to take the Gospel into Europe. A totally new area where the gospel had never been preached before. All those weeks of walking and waiting, walking and praying. All those frustrating blockages where the Spirit of God had said “no” had led them to this. They were so sure it was God, they wasted no time in getting going across the water to Greece. And there began a whole new Gospel initiative that resulted in miracles, new converts, and many new churches established. It was the dawning of a whole new day.

God knows.

If we can take one truth from this scripture it is this. God has bigger purposes than we can see from where we are now. When relationships break down. When doors slam shut in our faces. When the road is difficult and we feel like we are losing our way. When we feel it's all been a waste of time and energy, we need to hold to this truth. God knows what he is doing. I want to finish with a true story of the amazing way God has used a couple in the Palmerston North Central Baptist Church.

Brent and Lily Norrish were a young couple in the church who felt God calling them to share Christ with Chinese people. Brent is a New Zealander. Lily is Chinese, born in Indonesia. They gave up their jobs as accountants and spent two years training for missions at Bible College in Auckland. At the end of their training they applied to mission agencies to work in China, and in other places in Asia where there were Chinese people. Every mission agency turned them down and every door seemed to slam shut in their faces. They came back to their church angry, disappointed and frustrated that their call to mission had hit a brick wall. One day as they were playing in the park with their two little kids, they met a young Chinese couple with little children. The Chinese couple asked them if they knew anyone who would teach them English. Brent and Lily said they would, and they would like to use the Bible as the means of teaching English. They started a Bible study in their home, and soon there were lots of Chinese people wanting to come to learn English. The Bible study grew and grew. Each year Brent and Lily would share Jesus with about 70 Chinese people. Many of them became Christians, who went back to China to share Christ with their friends. That Chinese ministry grew to become a fully fledged congregation in their church, with their own Chinese Pastor on staff. That Chinese ministry has been going for about 20 years, and there have been dozens of people who have found Christ and been baptized as followers of Jesus. One was a professor of Communism at a university. Another was a High Court Judge. Each year Brent and Lily and their team are seeing Chinese people come to Christ, who go back to China to tell their friends about Jesus. The Spirit of God hasn't led them to Chinese people in Asia. He has led Chinese people to them in their own hometown. It all began with a couple who found receptive soil right in their own home town.

Let the Spirit lead you. You may not finish up where you think you were going, but you will be in the place where he wants you to be.