

THE STRATEGY OF THE SPIRIT

by Ray C. Stedman

The missionary call of Barnabas and Saul, recorded in the thirteenth chapter of the book of Acts is replete with practical helps in a problem that bothers many Christians: How to recognize the guidance of God, how to know the directions of life, and to find the will of the Holy Spirit in these matters.

The thirteenth chapter is a turning point in the book of Acts. It is what Winston Churchill would have called one of the hinges of history. It marks the beginning of the third phase of our Lord's great commission. In the opening chapter of this book, before he ascended into the heavens, he said to his disciples, "You shall receive power after the Holy Spirit is come upon you, and you will be witnesses of me," {Acts 1:8a RSV}. Then he outlined geographically how that witness should proceed, beginning in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, and finally unto the uttermost parts of the earth. In Chapter 13 we meet the beginning of the last phase, the going unto the uttermost parts of the earth. It is also the beginning of the apostleship of Paul. Up to this time, though he was called to be an apostle when he was first converted on the Damascus road, he has never acted as an apostle. Now, some eleven or twelve years after his conversion, he begins to fulfill the ministry to which he was called as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps the most important thing about this section is that here is found a revelation of the manner of the leading of the Spirit, how the Spirit of God guides his people. Let us get this before us, for this is of great importance. The first three verses relate the setting for the call of the Holy Spirit.

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Symeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. {Acts 13:1-3 RSV}

Notice that the whole event begins with a group of Christians in the church in Antioch who are exercising the spiritual gifts that were given to them. There are listed here certain prophets and teachers -- men who had the gift of prophecy, and others who had the gift of teaching. It is not very apparent from the English text, but in the Greek version it is clear that there were three men who were prophets and two who were teachers.

The first three are prophets: Barnabas, whom we know and have met before, Symeon who was called Niger (that, by the way, is a reference to the area of Africa now known as Nigeria and indicates that perhaps this man was a black; many scholars feel that he was), and Lucius of Cyrene, also from North Africa. We may have met this man, Symeon, in the Gospels, as the one who was impressed by the Romans to bear the cross of Jesus on his way to the crucifixion {Matt 27:32}. Remember there was a man called Simon (Symeon) of Cyrene, who was commanded by the Roman soldiers to take up the cross of Jesus when he fell under its weight. It may very well be this same man, now listed here as one of the prophets at Antioch.

Then there were two teachers: Manaen, a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch. This is not the Herod we met in chapter twelve, whose death is recorded there, but this Herod is the one under whom our Lord suffered and before whom he appeared. The Greek text again makes clear that this man, Manaen, was a foster brother of Herod. He was related to him as a foster brother and thus was very close to the king. Here is a collection of people from all walks of life who made up the church: a black man, or perhaps, two blacks; a man from the island of Cyprus, Barnabas; and a nobleman from the aristocratic class of society. With them was Saul of Tarsus. The amazing thing here is that he is listed only as a teacher. He is not called an apostle, he is not even a prophet; he is a teacher in the church at Antioch. At this point in his career, the only gift that had become manifest in his life was that wonderful ability he had to teach the Word of God.

Now while these men were performing their gifts, busy doing what God had equipped them to do in the

church, the Spirit of God spoke to them. I think that is very significant.

There are many young people I find today who are looking to God to lead them in some dramatic way. They think they must go away and hole up in a cave somewhere to commune with nature in order for God to speak. Once they get away on a mountain somewhere then he will speak in some dramatic fashion and send them back with a great sense of call. Perhaps some here have been waiting thirty or forty years for that to happen, and it has not happened yet. Very probably it is not going to happen at all because God does not call that way very often. Sometimes he does, but usually his call comes when one is busy exercising his gift where he is, just as here.

These men were busy employing their gifts, and, in the midst of their activity, the call of the Spirit came.

Now, I do not know how he spoke. It may have been through a prophetic utterance of one of these prophets as they were gathered together worshipping and ministering, (performing their gifts). Or it may well have been that he spoke as he speaks to many today in what we have learned to call "insistent unanimity," i.e., a deep conviction shared by everyone in the group that the Spirit of God desires a certain thing.

This is the way he has led us many times here at Peninsula Bible Church. We have felt a deep, insistent sense that the Spirit was moving in a certain direction, and everyone shared it. Whenever we have had this sense of unanimity we have taken it as the leading of the Holy Spirit, and subsequent events have invariably proved it to be true.

This is often the way God works. He spoke to men who were already at work doing what they knew. You can steer a ship or a car if it is moving, but it is very difficult to steer it when it is sitting still. God loves to see people at work at what they know to do, and then he will give them further direction.

Notice also two elements of the Spirit's sovereign choice:

1. He chose the men, and
2. He chose the work.

He said, "Separate unto me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." He did not tell the church what that work was although he had told Barnabas and Saul what it would be. We do not find out what it is until we read on and see what they did. But the Spirit had spoken to these men, and had laid on them a deep concern to reach out to the world around; then he said to the church, "Now set them aside for this purpose." That is the way the call of God came in this initial thrusting out toward the uttermost parts of the earth.

One other thing ought to be commented on here and that is the fact that they were all fasting. This was not because they were overweight, it was because they were concerned. In the Bible, fasting is always the mark of deep spiritual concern. It means that one is willing to forego the normal demands of life in order to concentrate for a time on finding what God wants, and to pray that what he wants will be accomplished. It is too bad that fasting has largely disappeared from the Christian church because it is a very helpful and very needed expression of spiritual awareness and deep spiritual concern. As these men were thus concerned about what God would do, they met together, and exercised their gifts, and the Spirit of God spoke to them. When he spoke, the whole church recognized it and identified themselves with these two men as they went out. Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. That means the whole church was involved -- one body, acting together to indicate to these men that they would be with them in the support of prayer and whatever financial support they needed to fulfill their ministry. They sent them out with this expression of the unity and harmony of the whole church together behind them. That is the body at work. What a beautiful picture it is.

But there is here also a wonderful blending of the sovereignty of the Spirit and the responsibility of men. Look at this next section:

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia; and from there they

sailed to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. {Acts 13:4-5 RSV}

There is a blending here of two factors: God's sovereign authoritative choice, and man's necessity to choose within a more limited area. There is first the sending out of these men and the account says they were sent out by the Holy Spirit. It was the Spirit who laid this on their hearts, and created an intense desire within to move out. But then the next phrase reads, "they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus." The Spirit did not tell them to go to Cyprus; that was the choice of Saul and Barnabas. The Spirit told them to move out, but the men decided where to go. This is perfectly proper. Paul and Barnabas were acting on the basis which Paul describes later in the Philippian letter: being confident that the Spirit was not only thrusting them out but was working in them to decide where to go. As Paul put it, "work out your own salvation [solutions] with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his pleasure," {Phil 2:12-13 RSV}. When they thought over the situation they decided Cyprus would be the logical place to start. They did not wait for the Spirit to point it out on the map; they decided on the basis of the natural contacts they had. You see, Barnabas was from Cyprus and so were the men who started the church at Antioch. They undoubtedly had many contacts there, so that is where they started. But they went with the confidence that God was in that choice.

Now that is the way to be led of the Spirit. The Spirit may lay on your heart some need, some ministry, some opportunity that is before you, and you feel impressed to do it, and perhaps others will join you in it. But you do not know quite how to get started. Then, start with what looks like the most natural thing, being confident that God is in you to govern and lead you in your choice, and to bring out of it what he wants.

Note also that they began in the synagogues. Why did they start there? "Well," you say, "it was because they were Jews and they knew other Jews would listen. They had the Scriptures and it was the most natural place to start." Yes, that is true, but I do not think that is why they started in the synagogues. We are not told this in the text here, but in The Epistle to the Romans we learn that it was revealed to Paul that the gospel was first to go to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. He was to begin everywhere he went with the Jews. That is why they went to the synagogues on Cyprus. There again is a combination of natural reasons and the specific and precise command of the Holy Spirit. Paul always obeyed this pattern. He went to the Jews, and, when they rejected the message, he went to the Gentiles.

Then they took with them an intern. His name was John Mark. Mark was not commanded of the Lord to go with them, but Saul and Barnabas chose him. Here again is a human element once more in this passage. Why did they choose Mark? Well, for one thing, he had a rich mother; and second, because he was Barnabas' cousin. They simply followed natural lines of choice and took young John Mark with them as an intern on this journey. Mark is the one who later was to write The Gospel According to Mark. As we shall see in the next account, he got into trouble on this journey when he and Paul had a serious disagreement. That, I think, was because Mark was a bit spoiled. He was the son of a wealthy widow in Jerusalem, and it is also my belief that he was the rich young ruler to whom the Lord spoke on one occasion, who refused to follow him because he had great possessions. There is some evidence that indicates this rich young ruler was Mark. If so, this account here reveals that there came a time when he was willing to give up his possessions and follow Christ. Now, here, he is with Paul and Barnabas on their journey.

They went to Cyprus, landed at Salamis, and began to preach. Obviously they expected God to be with them and to open doors everywhere they went. This is the way the Holy Spirit commonly operates. No one is to wait for orders covering everything he does.

There are many mistaken ideas abroad today as to how the Holy Spirit leads us. Young Christians often get the idea that they are to be like robots, automatons, ruled by computer-impulses which come from the Spirit. They think we are to sit and wait until we get one of those.

I remember a young man at Dallas Seminary when I was a student there who thought that was the way the Spirit worked, so he would stop at the foot of a staircase and ask God to show him whether he should go up the right side, or the left. He would pray about whether to put his hat on in the morning, or not.

If God ran our lives like that we would be nothing but mechanical beings. Animals are run like that by instincts, but not men. God is not interested in such antics. He is interested in our understanding that he is to live within us. He will direct us precisely at times (and when he does, don't ignore it), but when he doesn't, move out where you are with the confident expectation that God is with you and will open the doors to make a way for you. When you follow that pattern, you are bound to find life exciting. God is very creative, and he is always doing something surprising, unexpected.

You cannot improve upon the strategy of the Holy Spirit. No one could anticipate the right way to approach these Cyprian cities, and plan out an attack in some systematic way, and expect it to succeed.

This is the problem with the church in the twentieth century. We are forever calling conventions, councils, retreats, and conferences to try to decide where we ought to go next, to program it all, structure it, organize it, and move along carefully planned lines as though the whole thing depended on us. That is why the church is faltering, and failing, and has lost its note of excitement.

The strategy belongs to the Holy Spirit. He is the only one that knows how to reach a city, or a country, or a nation -- how to proceed. He already has men planted here and there, ready to respond whenever his people go out to proclaim the truth. That is what Paul and Barnabas found.

I heard a wonderful example of how the Holy Spirit works along this line recently. A friend told me that the Christian World Liberation Front was trying to do something about the topless and bottomless bars in San Francisco. They organized a protest, and on Saturday would walk up and down in front of some of these lewd, lurid places, carrying signs, rather ironic signs, such as:

THURSDAY NIGHT IS FAMILY NIGHT

BRING THE CHILDREN TO EL CONDOR

They made people so embarrassed by these that they would not go in and the attendance decreased remarkably. Finally the management became quite upset and sent out a bouncer to order them off the place. But these Christians, knowing they had a right to orderly protest, refused to leave. One night the bouncer got very angry, and hit one of the leaders square in the mouth. The next night they were back again, not knowing how to proceed, but counting on the Lord. This time the bouncer came out and ordered them to go, and they said, "No," not unless they could go in and pray for the people first. Surprisingly, the management agreed and invited them in. They all went in and the place was absolutely dead silent. These Christians stood up on the stage by the microphone, surrounded by naked girls, and led the whole place in prayer. One fellow said he peeked while the rest were praying and saw the bouncer going around quietly closing all the doors so they wouldn't be disturbed by any noise from the street. They had a tremendous opportunity to speak the truth to people, who became utterly different in their demeanor when they were confronted with this kind of a contrast between the right and the wrong.

Now that is the radicalism of the Holy Spirit. You cannot improve on it. That is what we find all through the book of Acts; this remarkable combination of divine sovereignty and human responsibility which, working together, co-laborers with God, produces exciting situations and climactic circumstances where anything can happen, yet which almost always opens a wide and fruitful door for ministry.

Paul and Barnabas went through the island of Cyprus that way. Luke does not tell us everything they did by any means. Undoubtedly they had a very effective ministry because Christian churches were established in Cyprus right from the beginning. But only one incident in Cyprus is recorded for us, and that for a special reason.

Luke tells us Paul and Barnabas passed through the island from the east to the west, probably visiting all the cities along the way (which may have taken them two or three months), and finally arrived at Paphos, the capital of the island on the western shore. There an unusual incident occurred.

When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain

magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) withstood them, seeking to turn away the proconsul from the faith. {Acts 13:6-8 RSV}

Here is a remarkable example of how the Holy Spirit works. Paul and Barnabas had no idea that they would be able to have a hearing before the governor of the island, the proconsul, the man placed there by the Roman senate and responsible for the control and governance of the whole island. But that man, prompted by the Holy Spirit, though he was a pagan Roman, sent for Paul and Barnabas, and asked them to speak to him the words of truth. You can never anticipate how the Holy Spirit is going to work things out. But Paul and Barnabas came and began to preach to the governor.

It is interesting that archeology has confirmed this incident because inscriptions bearing the name of this very man have been found in Cyprus. Furthermore, Sir William Ramsey has uncovered evidence that he was a Christian, and that his whole family became Christians, and were very prominent in Christian circles after this event. Here is one of those cases where archeology has clearly confirmed the report of this accurate historian, Luke.

At any rate, when Paul and Barnabas came and began to teach Sergius Paulus they were opposed by a Jewish magician whose name was Elymas. That is the name which he took for himself and which, in Greek, means magician. His name in Hebrew was Bar-Jesus and from that we get a hint of what this man was doing. Bar-Jesus means "the son of Jesus." In the Hebrew culture to call yourself a son of someone was to designate yourself his follower. When this man, therefore, called himself Bar-Jesus he was claiming that he was a follower of Jesus, but what he taught was absolutely contrary to what Jesus taught. He was, in other words, the first in a long line of Christian cultists who seize upon the name of Jesus and the name of Christianity as a guise for utterly un-Christian teaching.

There are many who have followed him, and there are many psuedo-Christian cults today. Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others seize upon the name of Jesus, claim the name of Christianity, yet teach the most un-Christian doctrines. That is what this man was doing.

He very greatly provoked the spirit of Paul because he was such a fraud, pretending to be a follower of Jesus, but teaching that which was exactly contrary and opposing everything that Paul and Barnabas taught. Paul was deeply disturbed by this and, aroused in his spirit, and, as we are told, "filled with the Holy Spirit," he spoke to this man.

But Saul, who is also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?" {Acts 13:9-10 RSV}

Do you see what was happening? Paul was declaring the straight paths of Jesus, but this man was teaching deviations, was making them crooked and was thus misleading this proconsul. So Paul said, in these very tactful and courteous words, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of deceit and villainy, you had better stop what you're doing, perverting the straight paths of the Lord." Then he did a very significant thing. He declared,

"And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. {Acts 13:11-12 RSV}

Why is this event selected out of the ministry at Cyprus and recorded for us as the one significant occurrence of that ministry? It is because, here, Paul became an apostle. He began here to exercise his apostleship: For the first time and "filled with the Holy Spirit," he began to act as an apostle. This is the first of those "signs of an apostle" which Paul would tremendously fulfill to indicate that he was selected by the Lord Jesus to be a

founder of the church, who could lay the foundation of faith in the Scripture, and become a writer of the Scriptures. Here he speaks with the same authority that Peter had when Ananias and Sapphira attempted to pose as pious frauds, as recorded in the fifth chapter of Acts. There too there was an immediate judgment. Only the apostles had power to act in judgment like this. This is not something any Christian is to do. But here Paul becomes an apostle and immediately the leadership shifts from Barnabas to Paul. From here on it is no longer Barnabas and Saul; it is Paul and Barnabas. Notice how that is confirmed by verse 13.

Now Paul and his company set sail from Paphos, and came to Perga in Pamphylia. {Acts 13:13a RSV}

This is the beginning then of the great ministry of the Apostle Paul. The thing that characterized it primarily was his power in teaching. What impressed this proconsul was not the miracle; that simply confirmed what he had heard. What impressed him was the teaching, the remarkable, radical doctrine of Christianity, that Jesus Christ the Son of God become man and was prepared to live his life again in every human being who would receive him. The life they would then live would no longer be their life, but his life, lived in their situation. That is the remarkable thing about Christianity. That is what impressed this proconsul and made him believe.

Prayer:

Dear Father, make us obedient followers of the strategy of the Spirit and careful teachers of this most revolutionary truth. Our age needs this as desperately as did the first century. Make us to be faithful imitators of Paul, as he was of Christ. In His name, Amen.

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