



The recipe for church planting from the book of Acts

The book of Acts is the closest thing we have to a manual for church planting and missions in the New Testament. In it is story after story of the Lord's hand in the growth of the church through missions and church planting. Although the age of the apostles was an extraordinary time in the life of the Church, the narrative of Acts lays out many practical principles for church planting that abide in all times and places. One practical point to learn from Acts is that we need not only a passion for the work of planting new congregations, but a willingness to respond to the Spirit's leading and engage in the work of planting churches - whether as the overseeing church or as partnering churches.

This article will look at Acts 16:6-10 to see how Luke speaks about this leading of the Holy Spirit, who is the sovereign leader, creator, and source of church planting. He is the sovereign Spirit of missions. If we are going to be commissional churches, obeying our Lord's command in Matthew 28, we need to be sensitive and obedient to the leading of the Holy Spirit in the 21st century.

The Spirit's leading

(Acts 16:6 cf. 13:2)

Verse 6 says, *"And they went."* The question is, "How did they, that is, Paul, Silas, and Timothy come to this point in the narrative of going 'through the region of Phrygia and Galatia,' preaching the gospel?" Chapter 13:1-3 tells us how. While worshipping and fasting the prophets and teachers of the church in Antioch were told by the Holy Spirit, *"Set apart for me Barnabas and Paul for the work to which I have called them"* (v. 2). Thus, the sending of Paul and Barnabas was of the Holy Spirit's initiation and sovereign choice.

Yet, while the Spirit seemingly called Paul and Barnabas in this extraordinary manner, the Spirit had already been preparing Paul for this calling. The Holy Spirit did not just call Paul "out of the blue." This is important because today too many missionaries, church planters, and churches have sprung up because someone felt "led" by the Spirit. The thinking is that all you need to be a missionary or church planter is to have a "heart for the lost." One of my former neighbors "felt" that God wanted him to come to San Diego and plant a new church for post-modern people. There was no oversight, no elders, no group of supporting churches. The church no longer exists.

What we learn from Paul's experience is that while the internal call must be validated by the outward call, the internal call is tested and strengthened through ordinary means. The Spirit calls missionaries and church planters through the church as Acts 13 shows. Yet even this is no guarantee, as my secondhand experience has validated, that although a person may be sent by a church they often return as failures. Why? Because they had not truly been called of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit uses ordinary means, not just a desire. A church planter must be gifted and prepared for the task. The Holy Spirit had been preparing Paul by equipping him in three areas.

- **First**, he was educated in the Word (cf. Acts 22:3). Men need to be trained at solid seminaries.
- **Second**, he was passionate for a specific people-group, the Jews, as Romans 9:2 and 10:1 testify. This means that a church planter cannot be one who is just looking for a job, a salary,

or something to do, even if piously couched in terms of "just serving the Lord." A church planter must be one who is looking to plant in a particular place, with a particular people.

- **Third**, Paul was prepared to suffer for the sake of the Christ. The Holy Spirit who is sovereign calls those whom He has prepared.

Where to plant

(Acts 16:6, 7, 10)

The sovereign Spirit leads both where to send missionaries to plant congregations and where not to plant. He can do this because He is sovereign.

We most often think of God the Father as the one who is revealed in Scripture as sovereign, and rightly so. For it is he who called everything out of nothing (Genesis 1). He elected us by His good pleasure (Ephesians 1). He as the Lord of creation provides rain and sunshine (Psalm 104). He raises up kings and casts them down (Proverbs 21). He appoints nations, their boundaries, and their durations (Acts 17).

Yet, the Holy Spirit too, is revealed in Scripture as sovereign. He recreated the dark, void mass of chaos in the beginning (Genesis 1:2; Psalm 104:30). He who powerfully raises dead sinners to life (John 3; 1 Peter 1:3). He called Paul to preach in Acts 13.

So as Paul, Silas, and Timothy were traveling through what is today Turkey, we see the sovereign Spirit in action. Notice where they tried to go but where they were led to go. First, verse 6 says that they were going *"through Phrygia and Galatia"* because they were *"forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia."* They were trying to go north towards the Black Sea but were led through the center of Asia Minor. Verse 7 says that when *"they had come up to Mysia,"* which is the north-west corner of Asia Minor, *"they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them."* They still tried to get up into the northern territories, going clockwise around Asia Minor. They were being led in-between the region of Asia in the south and Bithynia in the north through a desolate region with no major cities.

Some may think, "But I thought the Holy Spirit was the Spirit of missions? Why would He forbid the gospel from being preached?" In verse 9 Paul sees a vision of a man in Macedonia and in verse 10 they leave for Macedonia. Were the Macedonians more deserving of the gospel than the Asians or Bithynians? Did God love Macedonia more? We must simply say with John Calvin that it was the secret will of God. By preaching in Macedonia the gospel came to Lydia, the Philippian jailer, Thessalonica, one of Paul's great ministerial joys, Berea, the studious believers, Athens and the great debate on Mars Hill, and Corinth. This story can be told over and over again by missionaries and church planters. In fact, one of my parishioners told me after we began the Oceanside United Reformed Church that she and her husband had prayed for 10 years that a Reformed church would be started on the coast of north San Diego. Why did God wait for 10 years? We don't know. What we do know is that after 10 years of praying several families had come to the knowledge of the Reformed doctrines and all lived in coastal north San Diego County. At the same time I was graduating from seminary, having gone with the purpose of planting a Reformed church in Orange County, where my wife and I were from and where there are only few Reformed churches. Yet, the mysterious and sovereign plan of the Holy Spirit led us to where we are today - perfectly in His will, not ours.

Therefore, we must learn to trust in the timing and direction of the Holy Spirit in the life of a mission work, that He will make that direction and timing clear. We must humbly submit to the revealed things of the Word in church planting and the Spirit will do His work. Our task is to preach, evangelize, make disciples, be outward focused, do everything according to the Word, plant seeds and see what the Lord will do. We know that we are called to be salt and light in the place God has put us, so let's be faithful in that task. And when His leading is evident by bringing people to us from an area where there is no Reformed church, whether near or far, we need to say with the apostolic mission, *"...concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them"* (v. 10).

How to plant

(Acts 16:6, 10)

Finally, Luke's narrative in Acts 16 speaks of how the Spirit leads Christians to plant churches. What method and means do we use? We are to preach Christ and Him crucified. It is the Word of the gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16), the Word of Christ, by which hearing comes faith (Romans 10:17). The Word! The Word! The Word! In an age of gimmicks, methods and programs the book of Acts focuses on God's method of preaching:

And the word of God continued to increase... But the word of God increased and multiplied... And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region... So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily... He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

(6:7; 12:24; 13:49; 19:20; 28:30-31)

Although they were forbidden to speak the Word in Asia, they spoke it in Phrygia and Galatia; although they were forbidden to preach the gospel in Bithynia they preached it in Troas and then Macedonia. When they came to a river where some women were praying, they spoke to them and "the Lord opened her [Lydia] heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul" (16:14).

To plant a biblical church is to send the man the Spirit has chosen, where He has chosen, and how He has chosen. In saying this, we must not over-spiritualize this process and task by emphasizing the Holy Spirit's sovereign work to the point of hyper-Calvinism, waiting for some sign from heaven to go and preach. We must also be wary of over-emphasizing the method and means of church planting - preaching - lest we become too centered on our hearers' thoughts and feelings and seek to seduce them through the wisdom of man. Instead, we want both the sovereign Spirit to do His ineffable work but also the Word, which He has ordained, to be joined together. As the great Puritan theologian John Owen said,

*if we have the Spirit without the Word we blow up,
if we have the Word without the Spirit we dry up,
but only when we have the Spirit and the Word do we grow up.*

May God cause His Spirit to lead us by His Word into our world so that mature congregations may spring up all over the globe.

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