**VCBC SLG 2022 Fall Term**
**The Book of Acts**
**Session #8: The Missional, Multi-cultural Church in Antioch—Chapter 11:19 – 13:3**

Last time I left out the Addendum that gives a summary of the Evangelical thoughts on the Holy Spirit. So, here it is:

Addendum: A Summary of Evangelical thoughts on the Holy Spirit

Baptism with the Holy Spirit. As already noted, the references to the baptism with the Holy Spirit suggest an experience of fullness with the Spirit. When does this take place? And what type of experience is it? Over these two questions there has been much debate in the church. Part of the problem is that the experience promised to the disciples and its fulfillment were in many ways unique, unrepeatable events. The same can be said of some of the other experiences of the coming of the Spirit to new believers in Acts. As a result, we have in the church an array of interpretations of what this means today.

A traditional evangelical explanation is that, while in Acts there were unique experiences of this baptism with the Holy Spirit, for us today such a baptism takes place at conversion, and the term baptism is used for initiation into the body of Christ and the resultant experience of the Spirit." But there are also many evangelicals who see this baptism as a second definite work of grace, distinct from conversion, one that usually takes place some time after conversion. It raises Christians to a higher plane in their experience and enables them to enjoy the fullness of the Spirit. Different emphases are found within this particular interpretation. The Wesleyan holiness movement has emphasized holiness of heart and life, or entire sanctification, as resulting from this baptism. The Charismatics and Pentecostals have emphasized the power for witness and the sign gifts, such as tongues." Evangelicals like D. L. Moody and R. A. Torrey emphasized power for service, especially for witness, as the result of this baptism.

Somewhat similar to the view of Moody and Torrey is that of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who wrote that while the baptism with the Holy Spirit may take place at conversion, it usually takes place later and lifts a person to a higher level of spiritual experience.'? But Lloyd-Jones seems to have left room for subsequent baptisms with the Holy Spirit. In fact, he seems to use this expression also to refer to what we usually call revival, when the power of God comes on groups of people through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

This seems to have been the view of some Puritans as well. "Apparently detecting in the phrase no consistent, technical meaning, they took it to mean 'effusion in Spirit' or 'inundation in Spirit' and felt free to pray for revival in the terms, 'Oh, baptize us afresh with the Holy Spirit!"'

One of the strongest arguments for the conversion-initiation position is the apparent use of this expression for everyone in the church in 1 Corinthians 12: 13: "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body-whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free-and we were all given the one Spirit to drink." Others, however, have countered this claim. Howard Erwin argues that the first part of this verse refers to the Spirit's work of incorporating believers into the body as expressed by water baptism, while the second part refers to a subsequent experience, a Pentecostal-type baptism in the Spirit. According to this interpretation, lithe parallelism [between the first and second parts of this verse] is not synonymous; it is synthetic in which the second metaphor supplements the first." The question of how Paul could say that

"all" have had this experience is answered by stating that "in the apostolic age, the baptism in the Spirit, in a Pentecostal sense, was the norm." But what of the fact that many of these supposedly Spirit-baptized people were carnal and babes in Christ (d. 1 Cor. 3:1-2)? Erwin answers that lithe Pentecostal baptism in the Spirit is for power-in-mission .... The manifestations of the Spirit's charisms are neither evidence of, nor contingent upon, spiritual maturity."

What do we do with such differences of interpretation? Note first that there is little explicit teaching about how one enters into this baptism in the more didactic segment of the New Testament, the letters. But there are certain things we can be sure of. The baptism with the Holy Spirit implies a full experience of the Spirit, which among other things empowers us for witness. Paul makes fullness of the Spirit mandatory for Christians with the imperative: "Be filled with the Spirit" (Eph, 5: 18).25 Here, however, the result of the fullness is true, heartfelt worship (5: 19-20). (NIVAC, *Acts*, 54-55)

## I. Introduction

One of the most significant themes of the Book of Acts is how the early Christians obeyed the Great Commission as charged by our Lord before His ascension and did their part in being His "**witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth**." (Acts 1:8) And, the church in (Syrian) Antioch played a significant role in both

- The spread of the gospel beyond Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, signifying the beginning of reaching "the ends of the earth" geographically, and
- The reaching and inclusion of Gentiles into the Kingdom of God.

The latter role is further highlighted by

- The multicultural demographical nature of the leadership of the church,
- The intentional missional effort launched to reach "the ends of the world", marking her as a mission-minded church, and
- The distinction of the followers of the "way" from Judaism as "The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch". (Acts 11:26)

All these are the emphases of our lesson today.

## II. The City of Antioch

Since Antioch is such a pivotal city for this stage of the spread of the gospel, we should look at this city in the 1st century.

It was situated in the Province of Syria under the Roman Empire, although is at part of the city of Antakya in the Hatay province of Turkey.

It is the 3rd largest city in the Roman Empire, next to Rome and Alexandria. Historians put its population at about 500,000 at the time, and because of the location of Alexandria being part of Egypt (not as accessible), some Roman Emperors treated Antioch as the Eastern Capital of the Empire. As a result successive Roman emperors devoted a lot of resources to building modern Roman roads, circus and other architectural marvels of Rome.

Its cosmopolitan nature was undisputed. Together with its significance as a political, cultural and commercial hub, the choice of Antioch as the next springboard of the spread of the gospel both westward and eastward of the Roman Empire by the Holy Spirit is more than understandable.

It is worth noting that it had a sizeable Jewish population and "**By the beginning of the Christian era, proselytes to Judaism are said to have been specially numerous in Antioch**" (Bruce, *Acts*, 224) making the synagogues a natural gateway for the propagation of the Christian Gospel. Dr. Ray Bakke had done some research into the historical setting of Antioch at the time, and said that, as much as it was known to be a multi-ethnic city, it was still a very segregated city. Every Ethnicity—Italians, Greeks, Jews, Africans etc. lived within a walled area, and there was little social contact beyond the doing of business, and the Jews were, of course, very comfortable with this social arrangement.

### III. The Birth of Multi-ethnic Church in Antioch

With this in mind, let's look at the beginning of the church in Antioch, but we need first to look at what happened after the death of Stephen.

"**On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria**." (Acts 8:1)

- While chapter 8 goes on to mention how the gospel was spread to Samaria,
- followed by the all-important conversion of Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles (ch.9), and
- the conversion of the Gentile Italian centurion, Cornelius and his household through Peter who made a powerful testimony confirming the full-fledged salvation of Gentile believers being exactly the same as that of the Jewish believers (chs. 10-11),
- now the focus of Luke's narrative changes to what happens to "the ends of the earth" which is taking place at the same time or at least roughly the same time as the spread of the gospel to Judea and Samaria:

"**Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord**." (Acts 11: 19-21)

So, timing-wise, this is what happened to the disciples who fled Jerusalem, again more as "Gospel Immigrants" who "knew their time" and did not waver from their commitment to the Great Commission wherever they might be displaced.

If you look at the map of Antioch, we will notice the place called "Phoenicia" along the narrow coastal plain between Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea including the cities of Tyre and Sidon that we are familiar with in the OT. Cyprus is the island west of the coast where Barnabas came from.

These are Greek-speaking Jews who were attending the Pentecost in Jerusalem and had come to Christ either at the preaching of Peter at Pentecost and soon after. They have stayed in Jerusalem and were committed to the Apostles' teaching. Now at the height of the great persecution, they naturally would journey back to their home towns and spread the gospel. Initially, whatever verdict about the equality of Jews and Gentiles when it came to salvation in Christ described in the previous chapters concerning those in Samaria and in the household of Cornelius obviously had yet to reach the ears of these disciples. So, naturally, they would be "spreading the word only among Jews".

I believe that as the words of Peter's testimony and the news of continued conversion of the Samaritans and other Gentiles eventually reached they ears of the disciples in Cyprus and Cyrene (the northern tip of Egypt, toady's Libya), these "daring spirits among them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, took a momentous step forward" (Bruce, Acts, 2250).

These disciples knew that, with their gift of speaking fluent Greek, it was their task to reach the Greeks. Sure, there were Greeks who needed the gospel also in their own towns, but, I am sure, the Holy Spirit pricked their hearts to see the momentous role played by the church in Antioch by virtue of their strategic influence in terms of the political, cultural and commercial advantages. In other words, they saw the movement of the hands of God and they made a conscious decision to join Him.

By so doing, they ventured out of the walled city of the Jewish section and reached out to all ethnicities in Antioch and the result was astounding:
"**The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord**." (Acts 11:21)

While we have no idea how many people came to Christ then, but eventually according to many early church fathers' writings, the number of believers grew to any where from 100,000 to 200,000 in the first few centuries. Not a small number indeed!

**(1) A Church that impacted the Society**

In any case, it is remarkable that according to Luke, "**The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch**." (Acts 11:26)

Now, when you think about it, it would have made more sense if the disciples were called Christians first at Jerusalem, after all

- It was the place where the 1st church was born, and
- It was the place of ecclesiastical authority, as it was resided and presided by all 12 Apostles

However, it was still, at the time, seen as an off-shoot of Judaism, because the church in Jerusalem, for all intents and purposes, was a church for the Jews in the main, but not the church of Antioch—from Day One!

Sure, the church in Jerusalem was preaching the same powerful and epoch-shattering gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the church in Antioch lived out the very essence of this gospel.

I like the way Dr. Ray Bakke puts it:

- The church in Antioch "fleshed" out the essence of the gospel
    - A gospel of reconciliation between God and Men, but also
    - A gospel of reconciliation between Men and Men.

While commentators have different takes on the meaning of "Christians" or its implications

- they seem to agree that this is a not a name being labelled by believers themselves, by a name given by the secular Greek community;
- thus, "It is a not unreasonable suggestion that it reflects a situation which Christians were becoming numerous and were clearly distinguishable form Jews." (ICC, *Acts,* 556)
- Bruce points out that the word translated "were called" or "came to be known as" is not a passive verb, and its literal meaning is "to transact business." (Bruce, *Acts*, 228)
    - This makes a lot of sense, given the commercial flair of the city of Antioch;
    - That as the number of disciples grew, they did not sit within the segregated walls, but would continue their daily life (of business), and in the meantime, chose every opportunity to share the gospel with the Greeks (including or especially those they did business with);

- So, how could the Greeks address them with whom they did business?
- "Oh, these are the people who are always talking about *Christos*, the Christ-people, the Christians" (ditto).

Whether it was a demeaning term or not (as come commentators make it out to be), it is clear that the disciples were not ashamed of it and whatever the world might call them, they would continue to spread the gospel as these preceding verses indicate:

**"22 News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. 24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. 25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. *So for a whole year* Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch**." (Acts 11: 22-26)

(2) **A Church Well Discipled**

With is rapid growth, the church in Jerusalem felt the need, perhaps not so much to investigate this time, but to ensure that the new believers would adhere to the essential foundations for growth spelt out in Acts 2: 42ff. As a result, they made the most logical choice to send Barnabas to strengthen them. He was a logical choice because

- **"He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith" (verse 24)**
- He was so known for his gift of encouragement that the Apostles had already given him a nick name, "Barnabas" (Son [or bar] of encouragement), and so he did "encourage" these new believers of Antioch, plus
- He was known for his generosity with his money, having "**sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the Apostles' feet**" (Acts 4: 36-37)—so he was an excellent example to follow and
- He himself was from Cyprus, a Greek-speaking Jew who would have also been well respected by those disciples from Cyprus.

His presence seemed to have a great impact, in that "**a great number of people were brought to the Lord**" (v.24) in addition to the **"great number of people (who) believed and turned to the Lord**" (v.21) even before his arrival.

[As for the length of the duration covered by vv.19-24, it appears that

- The initial outreach of the "gospel immigrants" to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch likely happened at the same time of Philip in Samaria, and that might be a process that lasted for quite some time or some years;
- The "awakening" of the "men from Cyrus and Cyrene" to go to Antioch would also have come after some years when they have established their churches in their home towns;
- The great harvest of these Greek-speaking Gentiles in Antioch would also have taken quite a bit of time; and

- Also, the fruit born by Barnabas's teaching and encouragement of the local believers.]

So, Barnabas was sent because a great number of new believers needed to be strengthened and now even more had come to the Lord. Thus, Barnabas felt the need to get more help, and who better could teach and disciple these Greek-speaking believers than Paul from Tarsus with whom he must have developed a great rapport, having stood up for him in Jerusalem when everyone else gave him a cold shoulder (Acts 9:26). By then Paul would have been back in Tarsus for at least over 10 years (Paul mentioned that He [and Barnabas] went to Jerusalem 14 years after his 1st trip to Jerusalem (Galatians 2:1, and with this one whole year in Antioch (11: 26), he would have likely spent about 3+13 years in both Arabia and Tarsus.

Not that Paul did not preach the gospel in Tarsus, but that the invitation by Barnabas must have been understood as a "Godsend" to him, the opportunity to share the gospel to the Gentiles of this 3rd largest city of the Roman Empire which certainly gibes with the vision he had seen in Damascus. If Paul ever doubted why he was "rejected" by the Apostles of Jerusalem and had to spend some 10 plus years in relative obscurity, now he would totally see as God's perfect timing.

(3) **The Approximate Dating of events**

The continued narrative by Luke here provides a bit more solid clue to the dating of the events in the life of Paul up to this point:

"**27 During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) 29 The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. 30 This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul**." (Acts 11: 27-30)

We believe that this narrative is still within the "one whole year" time frame of v.26

- Claudia's reign can be dated with certainty from AD. 41-54. In other words, Paul's arrival in Antioch would not be later than AD. 54
- Given the likelihood that his conversion took place in AD. 34, a year or so after Jesus' ascension
- He spent 1st three years after that in "Arabia and Damascus" (Gal. 1:17)—i.e. up to AD 37;
- There was a gap of 14 yeas between his 1st and 2nd trips to Jerusalem described here (as Galatians 1: 18; 2:1 allude to), the end of Acts 11 should be dated about AD. 51 when he and Barnabas took the donations they collected from the churches in Antioch and the neighboring regions to Jerusalem.

[While for the longest time, no corresponding famine was recorded in non-biblical sources that could correspond to Luke's account. Josephus did cite a famine that affected Judea in particular that lasted three years, from AD. 45-48. In a recent study of famine in Egypt during Claudius' reign provides new evidence in support of the account of Luke. Famine of various degrees did happen in his time in AD. 41, 42, 49 & 51, according to an article published by Harvard Theological Review, October, 2011.]

Several things of note in this short passage include:

- The gift of prophecy was really not uncommon in the early church and it was not confined to the 12 Apostles—God indeed used all of His people;

- The desire to call for the need of their brothers in Christ appeared to be something not being imposed by the leaders like Barnabas or Paul;
- It was indeed very refreshing to note that it was the Gentile church that cared for the Jewish church in Jerusalem—that should put to rest any "discrimination" the latter might have for the former (which appeared not to be the case, see chapter 15); and
- This should also provide Paul a chance to build a better relationship with the Jewish leaders (the elders) in the church of Jerusalem.

### IV. The Missional Church in Antioch

"**25 When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark**." (Acts 12:25)

"**1 Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. 2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off."** (Acts 13: 1-3)

Luke appears to take a detour in chapter 12 to record the martyrdom of the Apostle James, the brother of John as Herod (King Agrippa the First) began his persecution of Christians, now extended to the Apostles (on whom the Jews seemed to be reluctant to lay their hands). While the incident was said to be "**about this time**" (Acts 12:1), the time is imprecise and it likely means that the "famine visit" by Paul and Barnabas and this persecution "happened at the early period of Christian history" (ICC, *Acts*, 573). In any case, this narrative does introduce us to John Mark who, later on, became the lightning rod of the "fight" between Paul and Barnabas.

Now, back to the church in Antioch which obviously welcomed the return of Paul (who was still called Saul by Luke) and Barnabas. However, Luke gives us further information that makes this church a model mission-minded church for all ages:

#### (1) Multi-ethnic leadership

It is obvious that these prophets and teachers are leaders of the church, and they truly reflect the multi-ethnic nature of its congregation. In other words, it is not symbolically a multi-ethnic church, it is clearly being "fleshed out" in the ethnicity of its leaders who included

- Barnabas: a Greek-speaking Jew from Cyprus
- Simeon called Niger: whose name implies that he was black
- Manaen: likely the foster brother of King Herod; and
- Saul: whom we know well is also a Greek-speaking Jew born in Tarsus

This is truly a tremendous breakthrough and presents a totally different picture from the religion of Judaism. Just imagine a "circumcised" Jew from Jerusalem, setting foot on Antioch, and came to the worship of this Antioch church and saw, to his amazement or perhaps, "horror" to see the picture of not

only of the congregation, but also the leaders worshipping, singing, praying and fasting, all in Greek and with a diversity of race that looked and sounded totally different from the church in Jerusalem.

But it was exactly during such a worship that we are told by Luke:
**"(T)he Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'"** (Acts 13:2)

Allow me to dwell on it a bit more:

(a) **When:** The Holy Spirit spoke to them while they were worshipping the Lord and fasting
- As we know, worship is necessarily God-centered with God being the center and focus, not the worshippers
  - We have to ask ourselves, does our worship lend itself to be a place and time that we, collectively, not just individually, are able to receive a revelation from God?
- And their worship is also marked by fasting
  - While the Jews had made their fasting an "act of righteousness" that was rebuked by Jesus (Matthew 6:1ff)
  - The collective fasting of the church in Antioch is certainly a sign of
    - Humbling themselves before God in worship
    - The acknowledgement of their sinfulness is certainly a focus
    - Confessing and repenting of their sin as they worship
  - Not that I advocate fasting in each worship, but this is such a reminder that confession and repentance of sin needs to play an important part in each worship!

(b) **How**: It appears that the Holy Spirit is directly speaking to them all, likely audibly which was not infrequent in the early days of the church, although this is just one of the ways even in Acts that the Holy Spirit chooses to reveal His will to the church. In any case, this call to mission was heard and received unmistakably.

(c) **What**: the call is to "separate them" or "set them apart"
- We cannot help but ask, "From what?"
  - Were they not already being set apart for the gospel, with Paul clearly set apart for reaching the Gentiles?
  - And, given the brief history of the church in Antioch, both Barnabas and Paul had been doing just that, and
  - For at least one whole year (and likely more by then), both had contributed to a great increase in converts to Christ.
- If I were among the believers of that church
- I would hesitate to send the two away and would secretly hope that they would continue to stay
  - "*Sure, they had already spent a whole year and more here discipling and leading the Evangelistic effort and*
  - *Sure, the church had grown by leaps and bounds*
  - *But, what is one year—we need them to stay and to strengthen us, especially all these new believers, and*

- *Even with our growth, compared to the size of the population of the city, there are still many lost souls to be reached, not to mention that in Antioch, its population continued to grow by virtue of its location*."

However, as they witnessed first-handed how God had used the two to reach many of the Greek-speaking Gentiles, and no doubt they had been told by Saul of his calling in Acts 9:15
"**This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel**"

- And this call has yet to be fully fulfilled, so
  - They understood that as important as the city of Antioch was
  - And as needful as the congregation of the church in Antioch was
    - God's kingdom is much larger that they were
    - This is called, "Kingdom perspective"!

**(2) Their response to the Call of Mission**

However, I find their response to this call for mission most fascinating in that, Luke says
"**So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off**." (Acts 13: 3)

I find the response for both the church and Paul, in particular, most fascinating:

(A) First the church:
They did not send Barnabas and Paul immediately, they, as Bruce puts it "after further prayer and fasting", i.e. they continued to fast and pray before finally sent them away

- I believe that they did not act on it right away, not so much because they needed to make sure this is the voice of the Holy Spirit
- I think the Holy Spirit spoke in such a clear manner that they did not need to make sure
  - although in our case, often they do need to spend time to make sure we do not hear God's will by mistake or we use so-called God's will to have our own way
- I think it is for the unity for the church
  - Most of the time, God might have made it clear to the leaders or the more spiritual ones
  - But not everyone is prepared to accept God's will
  - So their continuous fasting and praying is for the affirmation of God's will also in the hearts of all the people in the church
- And that is something we leaders, we who are spiritual should learn from
  - We need to spend much time in prayers in knowing God's will for the church
  - But even if we have come to know for sure, keep praying and waiting
  - Till the rest of the congregation also come to the same affirmation!

(B) But I find the response of Paul, in particular, very powerful

- You have to understand that Paul has been chosen directly by God to be the Apostle to the Gentile; he knows it very well
  - ***"Why should I have to seek the approval of any local church?***
  - ***Why should I have to wait for the church in Antioch to agree with me?***
  - ***Why should I need the church in Antioch or for that matter any church to lay hands on me, to send me out?***
  - ***Is it not enough to be sent by the Holy Spirit?***
  - ***Is it not enough to be anointed by the Holy Spirit?"***

And yet

- We find that Paul is willing to have his calling affirmed by the church
- He is willing to be sent by the church, as if he represents them and allow them to lay hands on them, before he would embark on the journey that **God has already meant for him**!

That is humility!

- Paul understands that
  - God has not called him to be a lone ranger
  - To accomplish God's mission all by himself
- He understands that he is but one member of the Body of Christ
  - He is really being sent on their behalf
  - The church in Antioch obviously needed him
  - But he too, needed them
    - Their affirmation
    - Their prayers and
    - Their support
- Because when it comes to Kingdom's Business
  - We are in it together!
- The work of God is never the business of one individual
  - But that of the whole body!

I like the way Chuck Swindoll puts it:

**"No one is too big!**
**No one is too small."**

- We all need one another
- In order to accomplish God s will
- In this place, in His Kingdom

**We are in it together!**