

FOLLOW THE SPIRIT'S LEADING

Acts 16:6-10

Venezuela has many beautiful Caribbean islands and beaches. Among them, Los Roques Island is the most beautiful and recognized one. The island's marvelous coral reefs will make you feel that you are in the kingdom of heaven. I cannot forget its blue crystal water, white coral sand, and white puffy clouds. However, I heard that coral reefs have been dying in recent days, especially in the Pacific Ocean, due to the temperature change of ocean water. It will be very sad if we cannot see coral reefs any more in the oceans. Even though the coral reef is a beautiful creation of God, it cannot help but die if it does not adjust to its changing environment.

The title of today's message is Follow the Spirit's Leading. Key Verse 16:10 "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." Through this passage we can learn how apostle Paul and his companions were guided by the Holy Spirit. Please look at verse 6. "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." Who are the actors of this story? They are Paul and his companions. The event of this passage happened during the second missionary journey of Paul. The first missionary journey was carried out by Barnabas, Paul, and John Mark. However, Paul and Barnabas were separated before the second missionary journey because of a disagreement regarding John Mark's accompanying them for their second journey. As a result, Paul took Silas for his second missionary journey and the author Luke records his travels. Acts 15:32 says that Silas was a prophet who encouraged and strengthened the believers. When Paul and Silas were in Lystra, they met a young disciple named Timothy, who had a very good reputation among the believers. Paul took him with them for the missionary journey. Hence, Paul's companions were Silas and Timothy. Additionally, there was one more companion. Do you know who was with them? He was Luke, the author of this book. His name does not appear in the book of Acts; however we can know that Luke accompanied Paul because verse 10 says, "...we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia..." This is the first time that Luke used "we" in the book of Acts.

Verse 6 says that 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. It seems that Paul and his companions wanted to continue to preach the word of God in Asia. However, the Holy Spirit prohibited them from preaching the word in the province of Asia. Why? We do not know the answer. But we can know that sometimes the Holy Spirit prohibits us from preaching the word of God in some places for reasons that we do not understand. God may have different plans for us and send others to those places. We do not know what happened to them exactly, but they were guided to travel throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia.

Please look at verse 7. “When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.” They continued to travel to the northwest and came to the border of Mysia. And then, they tried to enter Bithynia, to the north of Mysia, bordering the Black Sea. However, the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to go in that direction. The Spirit of Jesus is the Holy Spirit. The Bible does not say why the Holy Spirit did not allow them to go to the north. How could they know that the Holy Spirit did not allow them to do it? The Bible is silent about this question. Maybe they were interrupted by a winter storm or a disease like Coronavirus when they tried to enter Bithynia. But, they realized that the Holy Spirit did not allow them to enter Bithynia. Then, what did they do? Please look at verse 8. “So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.” It was not their original plan, but the plan of the Holy Spirit. Troas was a port to enter Europe from Asia Minor.

Paul could not understand why the things that he had planned were obstructed and the things that he had not planned happened. How do you feel when this kind of situation happens to you? After passing around 14 years of my life of mission in Venezuela it seemed to me that everything was going very well. Many Venezuelan leaders were working actively for God’s mission and our college ministry was growing. My business was successful and I bought a beautiful and big house. I felt that my missionary life was very blessed. However, an unexpected thing happened to me. I was kidnapped and faced the risk of death. The kidnappers put a gun to my head and threatened to kill me, demanding money. I thought that my life would finish there meaninglessly. I repented of my sins and prayed God to save me. By the grace of God I was released in two and a half hours. After that shocking experience, I needed to hear the voice of God to me. Through praying and reading the word of God I realized that it was time to hand over church leadership to Venezuelan native leaders. I loved my mission field–Venezuela and my brothers and sisters there; however, I had to make a decision to leave the country and come to America in search of God’s leading for my life. Sometimes God changes the direction of our lives very radically.

Please look at verse 9. “During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’” I think that Paul was wrestling with God in order to understand God’s plan. He prayed all night looking for God’s answer and God showed him a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” Macedonia was located on the other side of the Aegean Sea, which meant that God wanted to send Paul and his companions to the west. It was a clear message from the Holy Spirit. What did Paul do then? Please look at verse 10. “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.” They concluded that God had called them to preach the gospel to the Macedonians and they obeyed God’s calling immediately. The word ‘concluded’ implies that they had been looking for God’s leading constantly and finally found what God wanted them to do. They were guided by the Holy Spirit because they were looking for God’s plan for them.

Through this passage we can learn the following important lessons:

First, the main agent of mission is the triune God. Some people may think that the main actors of this story are Paul and his companions. However, they are not main actors, but supporting actors. Then, who is the main actor of the story? He is the triune God—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The most decisive works were done by the Holy Spirit: “having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia” (v. 6), “but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to” (v. 7), “concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them” (v. 10). We can find here that the triune God works together—Father, Son and Spirit, for God’s mission. God the Father sent the Son Jesus to the world to suffer, die on the cross, and resurrect from the dead in order to save humanity from sin. After Jesus ascended to heaven, God the Father and God the Son sent God the Holy Spirit to the world in order to continue the work of salvation until the second coming of the Son Jesus. And now, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit send the church of Jesus Christ to the world so that we can participate in God’s redemptive history preaching the good news of the kingdom. Therefore, our God is a sending God and a sent God. In other words, our God is a missionary God who is the main agent of mission.

We do not know exactly why God did not allow Paul and his companions to continue to evangelize in Asia and to go to the north, but sent them to the west. However, we can know that it was God’s wisdom so that the gospel might be spread all over the world. Can you please see this short video clip about the spread of the gospel? Christianity was born in Jerusalem and spread to Asia Minor. After that, the gospel entered into the European continent because of Paul’s vision of a man of Macedonia and then evangelized the Roman Empire. Consequently, the gospel was disseminated rapidly to all European kingdoms, Asian kingdoms, the Americas, the African continent, Oceania, and all over the world. Christianity has become the largest religion in the world with numerous people in different languages and cultures accepting Jesus as their Savior. Who has been the main actor of the mission for the evangelization of the world? The main actor is the triune God—God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, mission belongs to God, not to us. It is God’s mission.

Second, our responsibility is to participate in God’s mission through obediently following the Spirit’s leading. Because mission belongs to God, what we have to do is to participate faithfully in God’s mission following the Spirit’s leading. In order to follow the Spirit’s leading, we have to discern what God has done so far, what God is doing right now, and what God will do in the future with us. The discernment comes from God’s wisdom; therefore, we have to ask God to reveal to us His wisdom in order to participate in God’s mission. Then, how can we discern the Spirit’s leading practically? There are three ways.

Firstly, we have to pray continually looking for the Spirit’s leading in our lives and ministries. I believe that Paul prayed continually to be guided by the Spirit. When his plan of preaching the word in Asia was prohibited by the Holy Spirit, I believe that he prayed and went to the west. When his plan to go to the north was not allowed by the Spirit of Jesus, I believe that he prayed again and went down to Troas. Because he could not understand clearly the leading of the Spirit, I believe that he prayed all night until he had a vision of a man of Macedonia. When we

pray continually looking for the Spirit's leading, our God will be pleased to show us what God is doing and what God wants us to do.

Secondly, we have to hear the voice of God through Scripture. When Paul prayed continually, God showed him a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." It was the voice of God that gave clear direction to Paul and his companions. We may hear the voice of God directly in a vision as Paul did; however, we have a much more secure way to hear the voice of God, which is through Scripture. I believe that God is pleased to speak to us through the Bible. When we read and meditate on the word of God, the Holy Spirit makes some Bible verses touch our hearts as living words from heaven. And then, our eyes will be opened and our minds will be illuminated by the work of Holy Spirit through Scripture. Accordingly, we will be able to understand more clearly the Spirit's leading for us. I believe that many of us already have this experience throughout our lives of faith and mission.

Thirdly, we have to read and interpret the change of our surrounding contexts. Context is the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs. Some of us may ask why we have to consider our surrounding contexts in order to discover the Spirit's leading. It is because God is working now in our contexts. We believe that our God is the living God who is doing His redemptive work in our place and time. When Paul and his companions were obstructed from implementing their plans due to some unexpected conditions, they interpreted them saying, "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow us to do it." They read the change of their surrounding contexts and interpreted them from the perspective of God.

We can find many evidences in the Bible that demonstrate the Spirit's leading through the change of contexts. After the first missionary journey of Barnabas and Paul, many Gentiles were converted and integrated into the church of Jesus Christ. It was a big change of the church's social and cultural contexts. Hence, the church leaders had a council in Jerusalem where they discussed and agreed not to burden the Gentile Christians with Jewish customs such as circumcision, religious festivals, the Sabbath day, and so on (Acts 15:1-35). The church leaders read their contextual changes and interpreted them from the perspective of God in order to obey faithfully the mission of God. Definitely this decision was made with the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the expansion of the gospel to the Gentile world. If the church leaders had not made such an important decision following the Spirit's leading in that moment, Christianity would not be able to overcome Judaism and the gospel of Jesus Christ could not be preached all over the world.

Therefore, we need to be attentive to the change of our contexts and try to contextualize our methods of doing mission, which means that we need to examine and adjust our methods in the light of our changing contexts, while conserving the spirit of our ministry. Our church has been mission-centered from the beginning until now. Some of us may feel a sense of burden regarding the word "mission." However, mission is the very nature of the church of Jesus Christ. Accordingly, the church's main responsibility is to participate in God's mission actively and faithfully in order to fulfill its main purpose. Hence, our church needs to be missional as well as confessional. Confessional means claiming and reclaiming the church's identity in relation to the Christian faith. Missional means engaging its context and continuously re-contextualizing its

ministry.¹ We need God's wisdom to keep a balance between missional and confessional avoiding over-contextualization and under-contextualization in order to carry out God's mission fruitfully. If we do not re-contextualize our ministry continuously following the Spirit's leading, American young college students of the 21st century will join our ministry to participate in God's mission together with us.

One day in 1995, my Bible teacher asked me if I could go to Venezuela as a missionary. I had never thought about it, but I prayed to discern the Spirit's leading for me. Then, God let me hear his voice through Gen 12:2 "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing." When this word touched me through the work of the Holy Spirit, my eyes were opened to see God's vision and my heart became wider to accept God's calling. I believed that God called me as a missionary to Venezuela. I wanted to see God's practical guidance. My mom loved me so much that she would not let me go to a foreign country. However, God changed her mind and she accepted my decision, even supporting me financially. By seeing how God was changing my situation, I became more convinced of God's calling for me. God blessed greatly my life of mission in Venezuela.

When I was doing a disciple-making ministry in Venezuela, I tried to employ different methods keeping the identity of our ministry. After we experienced the powerful work of the Holy Spirit who led all of us to repentance of our sins and the confession of our faith that Jesus is Christ in 1998, many new college students made a decision to be disciples of Jesus every year. Then, I invited them to our Bible testimony sharing meeting with the desire of raising them up as faithful disciples of Jesus. Every year around 10 new people started to join our meeting; however, as time passed by, more than half of them did not continue with us. I asked myself why they stopped our discipleship meeting losing their spiritual desire. There were many different reasons and factors, but I realized that our discipleship meeting needed to be more dynamic and interactive. I did several case studies, created our own discipleship program, and implemented it in our ministry. The result was fruitful. Every year more than 10 new college students completed the program and joined our college ministry. They grew up spiritually and became the leaders of our ministry. Currently, Venezuela UBF has five chapters with more than 200 Sunday Worship Service attendees led by native leaders and sent out more than 10 missionaries to other countries.

Discipleship is not a program. My point is that the mission of God can be more fruitful when we follow the Spirit's leading interacting continuously with our changing contexts. To do God's mission must be practical and fruitful, for which we will observe our current situation; analyze it with our knowledge and experiences; seek the Spirit's leading to us through the word of God and prayer; discern the Spirit's leading together through conversations with a prayerful mind; and follow faithfully and obediently the Spirit's leading.

How has God been leading our ministry so far? God has been using UBF ministry amazingly for the world mission as one of the largest cross-cultural missionary sending agencies in

¹ Craig van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: 2007, Baker Books), 54.

the world. Furthermore, I believe that God has been forming the Chicago UBF church as a beautiful multi-cultural and multi-generational congregation even though we did not plan it. It is a great blessing from God in a segregated American society because American people can see racial reconciliation and the imagery of God's kingdom through us as Revelation 7:9a says, "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." Therefore, our responsibility is to be a genuine multi-cultural and multi-generational church following the Spirit's leading.

Finally, I want to highlight the importance of shepherd heart in order to fulfill God's mission. When Paul saw the vision of God and heard the voice of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us," I believe that he had great compassion on the lost sheep of God in Macedonia. He was moved by the shepherd heart of Jesus and made a decision to go to Macedonia in order to preach the good news of the kingdom to them. As Paul heard the voice of God's lost sheep, we need to hear the voice of the lost high school and college students who are begging us saying, "Come over to UIC, Northeastern, Northwestern, Loyola, Oakton, North Park, Moraine Valley and help us!" I pray that God may give us a shepherd heart for college students and bless all of us to follow the Spirit's leading obediently in order to carry out God's mission fruitfully. Amen.