

Holy Spirit Empowered Ministry

A case study of the church at Antioch

Dr. Jeff Iorg, President
Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary

In our day of complex church and missionary programs created and controlled by ministry professionals, advocating dependence on the Holy Spirit to empower missions sounds outdated or old-fashioned. Words like anointing, unction, and filling aren't common descriptors of church leaders or ministries. When we analyze a leader's resume, we usually look more for educational achievements and ministerial accomplishments than for evidence of spiritual power. We often measure churches the same way, focusing on external things like buildings or programs rather than looking at spiritual realities.

Both personal and corporate successes can be Spirit-empowered - and we hope they are! They can also be the results of concentrated human effort. It takes spiritual discernment and disciplined thinking to know the difference between fleshly competence and spiritual power. A healthy church is empowered by the Holy Spirit. An empowered church requires Spirit-filled leaders. A Spirit-filled church will be a missional church. Courageous leaders won't settle for anything less, personally or corporately.

This message will consider a case study of a Spirit-centered and missionally-effective church – the church at Antioch. The church at Antioch is significant as the biblical church that launched the first missionary movement. We will discover the Holy Spirit is featured prominently in the narrative describing this church in Acts 11:19-30 and 13:1-3. We will personalize these insights and also discover how the Holy Spirit's work in Antioch produced significant missions work.

The Holy Spirit in Antioch

There are three specific references to the Holy Spirit in the story of the church at Antioch, as well as many implied references since the book of Acts is more the Acts of the *Holy Spirit* than the Acts of the *Apostles*. The first direct reference to the Spirit is the description of Barnabas as “full of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 11:24). The second reference is to Agabus, a prophet from Jerusalem, predicting “by the Spirit” (Acts 11:28) a coming famine. The third is to the Holy Spirit intervening in a worship service to call Paul and Barnabas to missionary service (Acts 13:2). As previously indicated, the work of the Spirit is implied in other ways throughout the Antioch narrative. For example, the Spirit superintended the preachers who boldly planted the gospel - and the church - among the Gentile community in Antioch. The Spirit certainly sustained the church’s continued support for mission work as it developed over the years. The absence of the words “Holy Spirit” from the text doesn’t mean the Spirit wasn’t the Source and Sustainer of the church’s life. For the sake of clarity and specificity, however, let’s limit our discussion to the explicit references to the Spirit in the biblical record about Antioch. First, let’s consider the role of the Spirit in and among church leaders. Then, let’s consider the role of the Spirit empowering the church – particularly as it meets in public worship and initiates missionary activity.

The Holy Spirit fills leaders

Barnabas was originally sent from Jerusalem, in an apostolic role, to investigate the report of Gentiles becoming Christians in Antioch without first becoming Jews. The Jerusalem church was a Jewish church and many of its leaders were convinced conversion to Christianity

came with or after becoming a Jew. This controversy would later erupt in a full-blown conflict leading to the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15).

After Barnabas arrived in Antioch, his appraisal of the situation differed from the presumption of those who dispatched him from Jerusalem. Barnabas surveyed the situation, validated what was happening, and concluded Gentiles really could become Christians without first becoming Jews. Barnabas “arrived and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with a firm resolve of the heart” (Acts 11:23). He later brought Saul (Paul) from Tarsus (Acts 11:25) and the two of them went to work making disciples and bringing structure to the developing church.

Barnabas was described as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit, and of faith” (Acts 11:24). Although Barnabas came from Jerusalem in an apostolic role, he quickly assumed a pastoral role in Antioch. The church at Antioch, then, identified its earliest and most prominent leader as being filled with the Holy Spirit.

For a church to experience the empowering of the Holy Spirit, it must have leaders who are filled with the Spirit. To be filled with the Spirit means to be controlled by the Spirit, to be under his guiding influence. It means your will is submitted to the Spirit’s leadership. You are no longer independent or self-reliant - no longer trusting your strength, judgment, intellect, or training. A person filled with the Holy Spirit has emptied himself, emulating Jesus in “taking the form of a slave” (Phil. 2:7), becoming a servant of the Spirit’s desires, impulses, and urges. A Spirit-filled leader is empowered by the Spirit, producing spiritual fruit and supernatural results.

The significance of Spirit-filled leaders can’t be overstated. It’s essential because no church’s spiritual vitality will ever rise – *to stay* – above the spiritual devotion and maturity of its leaders. While an occasional spurt of spiritual growth is possible – while hosting a guest

speaker, during a moving worship service, or perhaps on a leadership retreat – no church’s spiritual power will exceed, over time, that of its leadership. The spiritual responsibility to be a pacesetter is a normal, healthy expectation of pastoral leadership. Pastors, and others in related ministerial roles, are *spiritual* leaders. We aren’t primarily organizers or administrators. Our leadership skills are more than a collection of techniques and acquired abilities. We are more than speakers and motivators influencing people by charisma or intellect. We are spiritual leaders. We model what it means to follow the Spirit’s leading, to be Spirit-controlled, to be in biblical language, “filled with the Spirit.”

So, how is a person filled with the Holy Spirit? While being filled with the Spirit is mentioned several times in Acts and commanded in Ephesians 5:18, no biblical formula guarantees the experience. For example, believers were filled with the Spirit when the church was inaugurated (Acts 2:4), Peter was filled while preaching (Acts 4:8), the church was filled during a prayer meeting (Acts 4:31), Stephen was filled at his martyrdom trial (Acts 7:55), Paul was filled as part of Ananias’ visit (Acts 9:17), Paul was filled while confronting a sorcerer (Acts 13:9), and the Pisidian Antioch church (the *other* Antioch) was filled in the midst of both blessing and persecution (Acts 13:52). While these fillings are reported, the process of how they happened is omitted. This was intentional (in God’s wisdom) to prevent formulaic incantations developing as a false means to pseudo-spiritual power. In short, there’s no mantra to chant or script to memorize to have a Spirit-filled life.

In every case in the Bible, the result of the Spirit’s filling is emphasized more than the process of filling. Examples of these results include: the church spoke the gospel in various languages (Acts 2:4), Peter preached courageously (Acts 4:8-22), the church witnessed with boldness (Acts 4:31), Stephen was sustained through his death (Acts 7:56-60), Paul was

delivered from blindness (Acts 9:18), a sorcerer was blinded and a proconsul believed (Acts 13:11-12), and the church experienced joy in the midst of hardship (Acts 13:52). What can be learned from this pattern?

The most important insight: while there is no formula for being filled with the Spirit, *the results of being filled are vital*. Because of this, it behooves us to try to answer the question, “how is a person filled with the Spirit?” While there is no formula, principles can be discerned from various biblical passages to facilitate this process. As part of understanding the work of the Spirit in your life, the following aspects of being filled must be considered. My choice of “aspects” to describe this list is careful and intentional. The following are aspects of being filled with the Spirit, not *steps* to the filling of the Spirit. Experiencing the Holy Spirit can’t be reduced to a series of steps. Experiencing the Spirit isn’t an assembly process – put prayer A in time slot Z! Our dynamic relationship with God defies such arbitrary categorization. Nevertheless, we aren’t without biblical direction guiding us toward the Spirit’s filling.

The first aspect of being filled with the Holy Spirit is conversion. All believers “...led by God’s Spirit are God’s sons. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father!’ The Spirit Himself testifies together with our spirit that we are God’s children...” (Romans 8:14-16). As a believer, at your conversion, you received the Holy Spirit as a permanent, indwelling presence that lasts a lifetime. Being filled with the Spirit isn’t receiving something new. It’s unleashing the influence of Someone who is already a core part of your spiritual existence.

The second aspect of being filled with the Spirit is surrendering control of your life. Many years ago a deacon told me being filled with the Spirit required “acquiescence of the heart to God.” *Acquiescence* was a new word for me! It means “passive submission, willing

compliance.” No other word, in more than 30 years of searching, better sums up this aspect of being filled with the Spirit. Besides, the word just sounds so spiritual! Being filled with the Spirit involves surrendering control of your life to the Holy Spirit. It’s a willing choice to become passive, to submit, to willingly cede control to the Spirit’s influence.

Fresh submission can be experienced through regular transparent prayer, not perfunctory or habitual prayers mouthed mindlessly. Bowing your head, getting down on your knees, or lying on the ground and asking the Spirit to control your life can be important intentional symbols of submission. When you humble yourself, you admit your lack of human-generated power (or wisdom, or ability, or anything else that smacks of adequacy), and put yourself on the path to spiritual power. Prayer crystallizes submission. But rote, formulaic praying is insufficient. Crying out to God – earnestly, passionately abandoning all pretenses – is praying that genuinely reveals lack of self-trust and a longing for the Spirit’s filling.

This doesn’t imply the effort in your prayers makes them more efficacious. Describing earnest prayer as the means to adequately express your submission to God doesn’t mean there’s magic in the bowing, kneeling, or otherwise expressing yourself. No outer work, no matter how earnest, produces spiritual change. The issue is *acquiescence* of your heart, not any certain method or mode of prayer. Outward expressions can be helpful means to express our innermost desires. They can also facilitate humbling ourselves, assuring us God’s favor because he “resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1 Peter 5:5). But no outer work accomplishes inner surrender. That is a choice to submit your will to God.

A third aspect of being filled with the Spirit is confessing sin and stopping sinful behavior. Since the Holy Spirit entered your life at conversion, being filled with the Spirit is more about removing barriers to his flow through you than obtaining something new. This idea

is captured in the simple phrase, “Don’t stifle the Spirit” (1 Thess. 5:19). Other translations use the word “quench.” Either word communicates the same idea. The Holy Spirit is alive in you. Yet, you have the capacity to stifle or quench His influence. How?

The Holy Spirit can be stifled or quenched – another word is “grieved” – by your attitudes or behaviors. In the midst of instructions about proper behavior for believers, Paul wrote, “And, don’t grieve God’s Holy Spirit...” (Eph. 4:30). That admonition is in the midst of instructions about managing anger, showing integrity at work, communicating with wholesome words, and avoiding bitterness, wrath, and slander. The placement of the warning is significant. You can grieve, stifle, or quench the Holy Spirit’s influence by your behaviors and attitudes. Your actions reveal who is controlling you. Your attitudes show who or what shapes your thinking. When you are in control, your choices drift toward self-serving, self-justifying behavior unseemly for believers. These actions reveal you aren’t submitted to the Spirit; therefore, not filled with the Spirit. Your actions, and the attitudes that motivate those actions, are a barometer on your spiritual condition.

A final aspect of being filled by the Holy Spirit is accepting his filling by faith. When you pray – confessing known sin, submitting yourself to the Spirit’s control, and asking for the filling of the Spirit – no special feeling will necessarily wash over you. Giving control to the Spirit is a spiritual exercise accomplished by faith. Remember, “...as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in Him...” (Col.2:6). You received Jesus into your life by faith. In that moment, the Holy Spirit permanently indwelt you. Submitting yourself to the Spirit’s control is a continuing act of faith. Believing you have his power is a faith-filled choice.

While the focus of the experience of the Spirit in Acts isn’t a formula for being filled, there is a clear record of the results of his filling. Barnabas being filled with the Spirit was one

of the reasons “large numbers of people were added to the Lord” (Acts 11:24). Barnabas’ assignment for missionary service was a result of the Holy Spirit’s control of a worship service (Acts 13:1-3). Clearly, Barnabas models supernatural results and life direction received through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Other results previously mentioned in other settings in Acts included preaching boldly, courageously, and in various languages (Acts 2:4, 4:8-22, 4:31, 7:2-60), blindness inflicted and relieved (Acts 13:11-12, 9:18), and joy in the midst of persecution and suffering (Acts 13:52). These results might be grouped in two broad categories – spiritual fruit (like joy) and supernatural results (like healings and conversions). These, then, are the two primary marks of the filling of the Spirit in church leaders – spiritual fruit and supernatural results.

The fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, and self-control) are character qualities produced by the Spirit. These aren’t native to humanity or produced by natural effort. They certainly aren’t common qualities valued among worldly leaders – just check out the “business leadership” section of any bookstore. Yet, these are precisely the qualities the Spirit produces and expects Christian leaders to exemplify.

When ministry leaders are filled with the Spirit, their character development reveals spiritual growth or spiritual fruit. Christian leaders are unique. They are expected to be role models. Their leadership competency is actually defined more by character than skill. For example, the qualities outlined in 1 Tim. 3:2-7 are heavily tilted toward character issues over performance capabilities. A pastoral leader must have skills: for example, “able to teach” and “manages his own household competently” (1 Tim. 3:2, 4). But the other ten to twelve traits in this passage (depending on how they are grouped) are all character qualities.

Clearly then, one aspect of being Spirit-filled is demonstrating transformed character – character produced by the Holy Spirit shaping your mind, will, and emotions so you demonstrate being “a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17) in Jesus. The label “fruit” communicates something passively produced by the natural process of a source expressing itself. Jesus said, “I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in Me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without Me” (John 15:5). Jesus, in you as the indwelling Holy Spirit, is your Source for spiritual fruit. Character transformation, unexplainable except as the result of transformation by Jesus, is evidence of the Spirit’s filling. Healthy churches have leaders whose lives bear spiritual fruit.

The other evidence of the Spirit’s filling is supernatural results. These may take many forms, but the results most closely associated with Barnabas (and Antioch) were large numbers of converts and the missionary advance of the gospel. Under Barnabas’ leadership “large numbers of people were added to the Lord” (Acts 11:24). While Barnabas was teamed with Paul, the gospel advanced to new cities and territories with large numbers of people becoming believers (Acts 13-14). Barnabas was winsome – a leader with demonstrated effectiveness in winning people to faith in Jesus Christ.

Some leaders are more gifted evangelists than others. Being filled with the Spirit doesn’t mean you will be automatically reach large numbers of people. But it means you will have *some* effectiveness in communicating the gospel and facilitating conversion. Leaders must set the pace in reaching people for Christ. We are uniquely responsible to help the church stay focused on its primary mission of reaching people with the gospel. A person being saved through your witness is a supernatural result. If no one is ever converted through your work, it’s fair to question your filling by the Holy Spirit. The filling of the Spirit produces various supernatural results –

including the supernatural, transforming miracle of conversion happening through your preaching, teaching, sharing, and/or modeling the gospel.

When is the last time you shared the gospel? Preached a gospel-centered message? Engaged in a meaningful gospel conversation with an unbeliever? Were present when a person prayed their commitment to Jesus as Savior and Lord? When was the last time a conversion movement happened through your ministry? A mission team or new church plant was launched from your church? If your answer to these questions reveals a lack of evangelistic fervor, consider the possibility you may not be filled with the Holy Spirit. Supernatural results – the conversion of people, sometimes large numbers of people as part of the missional advance of the gospel – are one indicator of the Spirit’s filling in a leader’s life. While there are other indicators, this one was the focus in Antioch and should be a primary focus for us as well.

The Holy Spirit in the church

Now let’s shift to the second half of the message, the Holy Spirit in the church. The first reference to the Holy Spirit in the church at Antioch was describing Barnabas. The other two references are in the context of worship services. The first was to Agabus who “predicted by the Spirit” (Acts 11:28) a severe famine was coming. The second reference was to the Spirit’s direction in a worship service that resulted in Barnabas and Paul being dispatched as the first missionary team (Acts 13:1-3). Let’s look at each of these incidents more closely.

Agabus was a speaker of some renown (Acts 21:10) from the Jerusalem church who came to Antioch to preach. On the surface, that doesn’t seem remarkable. Barnabas had already come from Jerusalem and established himself as a leader in Antioch. The Jerusalem church considered itself the “mother church” of the early Christian movement. It would be natural for

another one of its leaders to preach in Antioch, particularly if he had a special Spirit-prompted, prophetic message to deliver. Agabus predicted a famine which happened “during the time of Claudius” (Acts 11:28).

The response of the Antioch believers is, again on the surface, what might be expected. They heard their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem would soon be suffering, so they collected an offering and dispatched Barnabas and Paul to deliver it. It was a relief offering, an act of love from one church family to another. This all seems normal – until you consider the back-story of the relationship between these two churches.

The launch of the Antioch church had been scandalous to the Jerusalem church. Imagine – Gentiles becoming Christians without first becoming Jews! The Jerusalem church was a Jewish movement. Jesus told them to take the gospel to the entire world, but they had largely retained it in Jerusalem. It took the persecution of Stephen to cause the Christian Diaspora, scattering the church and initiating a broad movement of the gospel among Gentiles. When news about what was happening reached Jerusalem, Barnabas was dispatched to investigate (and some hoped terminate) the supposed pseudo-church in Antioch. The depth of feeling on these matters is shown by the intensity of later deliberations at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). Barnabas, however, discerned the legitimacy of the Spirit’s work in creating the new church. Rather than stymie the effort, he remained in Antioch and facilitated the church’s development.

Against that backdrop, consider afresh the response of the Antioch Christians. A leader from a church that hoarded the gospel and questioned their legitimacy had the audacity to ask the Antioch believers for an offering! Remarkably, they gave it – generously, willingly, without reservation.

This story reveals two aspects of the Spirit's work in the worship services at Antioch. First, the Spirit enabled preaching by Agabus and receptivity among the congregation. Second, the Spirit enabled generous giving. Keep those two aspects in mind as we consider other ways the Spirit worked in a subsequent worship service in Antioch.

Time passed and several men – Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen, and Paul – emerged as a leadership team in Antioch. They were leading a worship service that involved prayer and fasting when one or more of them (or perhaps other members) was prompted with an unusual message: "...the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul (Paul) for the work that I have called them to'" (Acts 13:2). After hearing the message they, "...fasted, prayed, and laid hands on them, (and) they sent them off" (Acts 13:3).

These events were unusual for at least three reasons. First, the message came *through* the church *to* the missionary team. Most often, when God gives a directive, he gives it directly to the recipient. Not this time. He spoke through others to call Barnabas and Paul to leave Antioch as missionaries. Second, this was unusual because it had never happened before. While the mission imperative was established by Jesus (Acts 1:8), the Jerusalem church was slow to develop an intentional strategy for kingdom advance. This is the first time a church formally set apart workers and sent them on a mission trip. And third, these circumstances were unusual because the most senior leaders left the church - unlike Jerusalem where the Apostles remained while others scattered (Acts 8:1). Most of the time, then and now, senior leaders facilitate others answering God's missionary call. This time the process was reversed. The church told its senior leaders, their most respected leaders, God wanted them to leave.

The Holy Spirit was active in the worship services at Antioch. The Spirit empowered the preachers. He enabled congregational response to their sermons. He motivated a generous

offering. The Spirit directed the congregation with a message for its leaders. And, he called ministry leaders to new responsibilities – including leaving pastoral leadership for itinerant ministry. These patterns are still evidence of the Spirit’s work in worship gatherings today.

The Holy Spirit still empowers speakers and energizes the preached Word of God. He still enables congregational response, including generous giving. The Spirit directs congregational decision-making, calls people to new fields of service, and sustains missionary advance by motivating churches to give up their assets - people (the missionary team) and money (the relief offering) - for kingdom advance.

Healthy churches experience the power of the Holy Spirit in their worship services. Healthy churches have *a holy expectation* something special will happen *every time* they gather to worship God. Healthy churches have leaders and members who seek God’s power in planning, preparing for, and directing worship services. Healthy churches experience the Spirit’s intervention while worshipping.

How can you discern if the Holy Spirit is moving in the worship services of your church? Simply put - supernatural things happen. Decisions are made and life change happens beyond the scope of human ingenuity. People give gifts, make commitments, and chart new directions because of insight received while worshipping. In short, things happen that can’t be explained by the work of your two hands!

When the Holy Spirit moved in the church at Antioch, the members *did something beyond their ability*. They responded to preaching, gave money, delivered messages to fellow believers, accepted a call to missions, fasted, prayed, and laid hands on fellow believers (commissioning them for service). When the Holy Spirit is active in a worship service people respond – privately yes, but also openly, definitively, and publicly. Certainly, public response

can be manipulated and be too dependent on emotional appeals. But foregoing all opportunity for public response in worship isn't the answer to those excesses. Leading worship services with integrity, including having the courage to stop pointless emotional displays that detract from worship in the name of "following the Spirit," is part of effective church leadership.

Healthy leaders and healthy churches have a sense of expectancy when they gather together. They seek the filling of the Spirit, personally, and the empowering of the Spirit, corporately. These churches create opportunity - spiritual, emotional, and physical - for people to respond to the Spirit's prompting in worship. They facilitate praying, sharing testimonies, confronting sinful behavior, public repentance and supportive prayer, and expressions of mutual support (laying on hands in Antioch, often a hug or handshake today). These churches plan time in their worship gatherings for response - using various methods but always giving people an opportunity to follow the Spirit's promptings, urgings, or instructions. Healthy churches expect the Holy Spirit to be an active participant in their worship gatherings.

Healthy churches are empowered by the Spirit. Healthy churches have Spirit-filled leaders. When the Holy Spirit is actively working in a church and its leaders, spiritual fruit and supernatural results are evident. This doesn't mean every person has a profound, life-altering experience in every worship service. It does mean, though, these kind of experiences are happening - regularly and in ways that can't be predicted or controlled. A healthy church has serendipitous experiences with the Holy Spirit.

The outcome of Spirit-filled leaders and Spirit-centered churches is missional advance. The culmination of the biblical narrative about Antioch is the initiation of the first missionary journey - the precursor to the modern missionary movement. We are right to focus on our mission to the nations. But, we must remember the power for leaders and churches in missional

advance is the Holy Spirit. We must focus on being Spirit-filled leaders and growing Spirit-centered churches. As we do, the supernatural result will be greater passion for and effectiveness in missions. May God give us the grace to believe this – and to live it!