The Spirit Sends May 24, 2026
7 of 12 in *The Holy Spirit Series: Book of Acts Edition* Acts 13:1-12

We're in a series where we've been tracing the movement of the Holy Spirit through the book of Acts.

Before we dive into today's message, let's pause and ask for the sake of those who may not know, what— or more accurately— *who* is the Holy Spirit? Christians believe that the one true God exists eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—one God in three persons. The Holy Spirit, then, isn't some abstract form of spiritual energy, but he is the third person of the divine Trinity— the personal and powerful presence of *God himself*, at work in the world and in the lives of God's people.

And today is Pentecost Sunday—the day Christians around the world remember the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as recorded in Acts chapter 2. Pentecost reminds us that the church was not born out of human ingenuity, religious ambition, or organizational strategy. The church came into being because Jesus poured out his Spirit on his people, just as he promised.

Before there were church buildings, budgets and ministry plans, there was prayer. There was worship. There was waiting upon the Lord. And it was during such times of prayer, worship and waiting that the Spirit of God came upon ordinary followers of Jesus, filling them with power, and sending them into the world as witnesses of the risen and ascended Lord.

The same Spirit still fills and sends the church today.

All of this matters for us at Cornerstone because we've been seeking God's direction for the future of this church. We sense God leading us into a new era of mission and ministry.

And one of the clearest lessons Acts teaches us is that God's work can never be accomplished by mere human ideas and effort. We do have a part to play, of course, but at the end of the day, the church moves forward in mission only when it depends on the Spirit, listens to the Spirit, and follows where the Spirit leads.

The church does not *invent* the mission. The church *discerns* the mission as it's revealed by the Holy Spirit, and then receives the Spirit's power to live it out.

Acts 13 vividly illustrates this reality. It marks a major shift in the story of Acts. Up to this point, the gospel has spread through Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria—regions marked by a strong Jewish presence, heritage and influence. But during a gathering of the church of Antioch, which was a richly intercultural congregation, the Holy Spirit initiates something new. Barnabas and Saul are set apart and sent out, and for the first time, the gospel of Jesus presses forward decisively into predominantly non-Jewish, or Gentile, territory.

What's striking is how this happens. The church is worshipping, fasting, and listening. And flowing from that atmosphere of surrendered attentiveness to God, we see that:

- The Spirit speaks
- The Spirit sends
- The Spirit empowers

Today, we're going to explore those three movements as they unfold in our Acts 13 passage, starting with how:

1. The Spirit speaks.

Listen again to verses 1 and 2 of our passage, where Luke intentionally slows down the narrative to give us details about the church in Antioch. He writes:

> 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. 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." [1]

Antioch was a city located in the south of modern-day Turkey. The church there was fast becoming a major hub of Christianity. And what stands out immediately is the diversity of its leadership team.

> Barnabas was from the island of Cyprus.
> Lucius was from Cyrene in North Africa.
> Simeon, called Niger (which means "the Black man"), would have been a Black believer, very likely another African.
> Manaen had connections to Herod's royal court.
> And Saul, who we've come to know better as the apostle Paul, came from Tarsus, a Roman hub for commerce, culture and intellectual exchange.

It's a remarkably diverse leadership team.

Already we are seeing the power of the gospel to create a new kind of community—one that builds bridges across difference and is united— not by ethnicity, nationality, or social status— but by faith in Jesus and a shared life in the Holy Spirit.

That said, Luke's primary focus is not on these leaders. It's on the church. When Luke describes how "they were worshipping the Lord and fasting," he's speaking about the whole church of Antioch.

They are gathered together, seeking God. And it is in this setting that the Holy Spirit speaks.

The Spirit does not interrupt a strategic planning session. The Spirit speaks during a gathering for worship and prayer.

The church is not frantically trying to invent its future. The church is attentively seeking God. And there's an important lesson here for us.

As Cornerstone seeks direction for our future, Acts reminds us that discernment is spiritual before it is strategic. Vision doesn't begin with brainstorming and whiteboards. It begins with prayerful

[1] Acts 13:1-2 (NIV)

attentiveness to God. The church moves forward only when it learns to listen to and discern the voice of the Holy Spirit.

And notice something else. The *Spirit* calls Barnabas and Saul—but it is the *church* that confirms and commissions them. Notice how Luke expresses this in verses 3-4:

> So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. [2]

The church sent them off… and they were sent on their way by the Holy Spirit.

Which was it? Were they sent by the church or by the Spirit? The answer is *yes*.

Because the Holy Spirit works through the church.

Christian mission is never individualistic. Barnabas and Saul are not spiritual freelancers chasing their personal dreams and ambitions. They are called by the Spirit and commissioned by the church community.

There is much wisdom in this, and we do well to make note of it. One of the dangers in contemporary Christianity is that we can become obsessed with individual personalities and self-directed vision. But in Acts, discernment happens in community.

Before the church moves forward in mission, the church worships, prays and listens for the voice of the Holy Spirit together. And that is exactly what we need as we seek God's future for Cornerstone. We don't so much need better ideas or sharper strategies or more robust data, although those things have their place. What we need above all is to become a people who listen well to the Holy Spirit, together.

And in many ways, that is what we have been endeavouring to do these past few years.

Back in 2024, our leadership spent significant time together praying and seeking the Spirit's direction for Cornerstone. The wider congregation joined in that process as well through a special Saturday Prayer & Re-Envisioning gathering—a time dedicated to worship, prayer, discernment, and communal listening for the Spirit's leading.

What gradually emerged through that season was a growing sense that God was releasing us from a pre-pandemic vision for Cornerstone known as "Vision 2020." Originally discerned around 2018-2019, that vision included aspirations of planting a second Cornerstone campus in another community, launching a third worship service, and developing a leadership institute.

That vision was meaningful in its time, but like so many other things, it had to be set aside during the disruption and upheaval of the Covid years. And as we emerged from that long season, we sensed that

[2] Acts 13:3-4 (NIV)

we shouldn't automatically assume a restart of that prior vision, but that we should prayerfully ask God whether he was still leading us in the same direction.

What emerged from the 2024 discernment process was a shared sense that God was releasing us from Vision 2020. Collectively, we sensed that the Holy Spirit was inviting us to come before him again with open hands and a blank canvas—to begin seeking God afresh for what Cornerstone's next era of mission should look like.

And that led to the discernment work we did in 2025.

Through an extensive and prayerful process of congregational listening and community research, including two half-day congregation-wide Re-Envisioning gatherings filled with worship and prayer, a clearer sense of the Spirit's direction began to emerge.

We began to recognize that our immediate mission field here in Markham-Stouffville has grown dramatically around us. The population continues to expand through the construction of high-density dwellings, and alongside that growth, the needs in our communities have become deeper, more complex and more acute.

And so, rather than pursuing a call to plant a second Cornerstone campus in another community, we increasingly discerned that the Spirit was calling us to deepen our presence, witness, and ministry right here, in Markham-Stouffville, where God has already established us. It was as if the Holy Spirit was saying, "Look around you. Your primary mission field is still right here."

Alongside this, the Spirit revealed four Guiding Priorities for us to live into as a church, starting now. These priorities serve as signposts pointing to the kind of church God is calling us to be and become in the years ahead:

Guiding Priorities for Cornerstone's Next Chapter
Deeper and wider discipleship
Building bridges across difference
Joining God in the neighbourhood
Cornerstone Centre as a hub of connection and belonging

This year, the discernment process continues. We now seek the Holy Spirit's direction as we work toward articulating a more specific and detailed ten-year vision for Cornerstone. There will be more to come on that later this year, including another congregational Prayer & Envisioning gathering in the fall. The date for that gathering will be October 17, so mark your calendars in advance.

All along, our goal has never been to chase the latest church-growth trends or manufacture a future for Cornerstone through mere human ingenuity and effort. We simply desire to reflect the posture of the church in Antioch in Acts 13—worshipping, praying, listening, discerning together as we ask, "Holy Spirit, what are you saying to your church?" Because the church moves forward faithfully only when it is attentive and responsive to the voice of the Spirit.

The next movement we see in our text is that:

2. The Spirit sends.

In this case, the Spirit sends two of the church's leaders, Barnabas and Saul, on a special mission. Circling back to verse 4 and moving into verse 5, we read that:

> The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to [the port city of] Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis [their first stop in Cyrpus], they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper. [3]

This is one of the great missionary moments in the New Testament.

The message of Jesus is now beginning to move outward in a fresh and decisive way toward the nations, towards the "ends of the earth" as Jesus himself had once put it. [4]

Barnabas and Saul travel first to Cyprus, an island in the northeastern Mediterranean Sea. This likely made practical sense, because Barnabas himself was from Cyprus. There were some Jewish communities there, with synagogues where the two could begin proclaiming the gospel of Jesus as Messiah to their fellow Jews, and from there bring the gospel to the Gentile population.

Here we see a pattern that Saul—soon to be best known as Paul— will repeat again and again throughout Acts. Everywhere he goes, he begins ministering in Jewish synagogues, and from there he extends his reach to the wider, non-Jewish population. As Paul would write later in Romans:

> For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. [5]

But as Barnabas and Paul engage in their mission, it doesn't take long for opposition to emerge. Starting in verse 6, Luke explains that:

> They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos [the capital city and the centre of imperial Roman authority in Cyprus]. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. [6]

Here, we are introduced to a man named Bar-Jesus, also called Elymas. He is described as a Jewish sorcerer and a false prophet who would have served as a spiritual advisor to the proconsul, Sergius Paulus.

As proconsul, Sergius Paulus was, in effect, Rome's governor in Cyprus—a highly influential figure. And interestingly, Luke presents him in a surprisingly positive light. He describes him as an intelligent man

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[3] Acts 13:4-5 (NIV)
[4] Acts 1:8
[5] Romans 1:16 (NIV)
[6] Acts 13:6-8 (NIV)

who wanted to hear the word of God. He's spiritually curious, open, and eager to learn from Barnabas and Saul.

Elymas, on the other hand, sees them as a threat. If Sergius Paulus believes the gospel, Elymas may lose influence, prestige, and even his livelihood. And so, as verse 8 tells us that Elymas "opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith."

Here, we encounter a challenging but important truth that runs throughout the book of Acts and elsewhere in the New Testament:

When the Spirit sends, opposition follows.

Whenever God's kingdom advances, resistance from the spiritual forces of darkness often emerges. In fact, we shouldn't expect advance without opposition. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright goes as far as to say that sometimes the presence of resistance is actually *confirmation* that the church is actually on the right track, because it's a sign that God's kingdom is advancing in enemy territory. This doesn't mean that every difficulty we encounter is spiritual warfare. But Acts certainly refuses to pretend that the mission of God unfolds without resistance.

Today, however, many Christians are surprised by opposition. We assume that if the Holy Spirit is leading us, then things should be easy. But scripture tells us otherwise. Pastor and author Erwin Raphael McManus puts it this way:

> Our religious integration of Christianity with capitalism and consumerism has resulted in a view of life that says, "If God is in it, it comes easily." Then, when the inevitable difficulties come— when we hit the wall— we either assume that God is not in it, or that we have made the wrong choice in our pursuit. I've become convinced over the years that the most important moment to seize, the most important God-opportunities, are the ones that do not come easily." [7]

As Cornerstone seeks new opportunities for mission and ministry, we should expect moments of challenge, uncertainty, resistance, opposition. Not because God has abandoned us. But because kingdom mission always pushes against competing loyalties, competing powers, and spiritual darkness.

But the story does not end on a note of opposition. Because where the Spirit sends, the Spirit also empowers. That's the third movement we see in our text:

3. The Spirit empowers.

In verse 9, we read:

> "Then Saul, who was also called Paul, <u>filled with the Holy Spirit</u>, looked straight at Elymas…" [8]

[7] Erwin Raphael McManus, *Seizing Your Divine Moment: Dare to Live a Life of Adventure*, 2002.
[8] Acts 13:9 (NIV)

This is actually the moment in Acts where Luke permanently shifts from the name Saul to the name Paul. As the mission increasingly moves into the Gentile world, Paul begins using his Roman name.

It is a small detail, but an important one. Paul is willing to adapt for the sake of mission. He wants nothing unnecessary to distract from the gospel itself.

But more importantly, here we read that Paul is "filled with the Holy Spirit."

In other words, the boldness that follows is not merely a matter of personality. This is not Paul simply being naturally confrontational—as if he were an Enneagram 8, for those of you who are familiar with that personality framework. This is Spirit-empowered witness.

Paul sees clearly what Elymas is doing. He's opposing truth, distorting the ways of God, and actively trying to prevent someone from coming to faith in Christ.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Paul confronts him directly, saying:

> "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun." Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. [9]

This is a sobering passage because it takes spiritual evil seriously. The gospel of Jesus is not merely competing against bad ideas or alternative philosophies. There are real spiritual forces opposed to the work of God, like we talked about earlier.

But notice this carefully: *the power of the Holy Spirit is greater than the powers of darkness*.

Elymas, who claimed spiritual power, is exposed as powerless before the living God. Paul announces judgment, and Elymas is temporarily struck blind.

Many Bible scholars point out the irony here, because Paul himself had once been struck blind on the Damascus Road. Perhaps this temporary blindness is also a kindness—a severe mercy intended to awaken repentance in Elymas.

What happens next? In verse 12, Luke tells us that:

> "When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was astonished at the teaching about the Lord."

That last phrase matters. Luke does not say Sergius Paulus was astonished by the miracle of Elymas being struck blind, although it surely made an impression on him. What astonished him most was "the teaching about the Lord."

[9] Acts 13:10-11 (NIV)

The miraculous sign served the message. The Spirit's work always points people toward Jesus Christ. Not toward spectacle. Not toward personalities. Not toward hype. The Holy Spirit glorifies Jesus.

And this Roman official becomes one of the first fully Gentile converts in Acts— and a preview of where the whole story is heading.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is for the nations. And nothing—not opposition, not resistance, not counterfeit powers—will ultimately stop the mission of God.

But here's what especially need to take notice of: The church's mission advances not because Barnabas and Paul are exceptionally gifted, strategic, or impressive people. The church's mission advances because the Holy Spirit empowers ordinary servants of Jesus.

Again and again throughout Acts, that is the pattern: The Spirit speaks. The Spirit sends. And the Spirit empowers. That matters tremendously for us as a church right now.

Because if we're honest, it is easy to feel inadequate when we think about the future. It is easy to look at the growing needs around us in Markham-Stouffville and wonder whether we are enough for this moment.

> How do we respond to rising loneliness?
> To cultural fragmentation?
> To anxiety among young people?
> To spiritual confusion?
> To people searching for belonging, meaning, hope, and truth?

And the answer, ultimately, is this: On our own, we are not enough. But the church has never depended on human sufficiency. The church was born at Pentecost because the Spirit of God came upon ordinary people and empowered them to bear witness to Jesus.

And the same Holy Spirit has not abandoned the church today. As we move toward the future God has for Cornerstone—as we seek to deepen discipleship, build bridges across difference, join God in the neighbourhood, and become a hub of connection and belonging—we do not move forward merely with strategic plans and aspirational language.

We move forward dependent upon the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. Because without the Spirit, all we have are human efforts and religious activity. But with the Spirit, ordinary people become courageous witnesses. With the Spirit, the church becomes a living sign of God's kingdom. With the Spirit, people encounter Jesus Christ.

And that means our greatest need as a church is deeper dependence on the Holy Spirit. To become the kind of people who pray first. Who listen carefully. Who discern together how the Spirit is leading us, and who obey that leading courageously. We trust that when and where the Spirit sends us, the Spirit will also empower us. Amen?

In many ways, baptism is a beautiful picture of everything we've been talking about this morning.

Because baptism is not ultimately about human achievement or self-improvement. It's a sign of what the Holy Spirit does through Jesus Christ. The Spirit awakens faith. The Spirit brings new life. The Spirit joins people to Jesus and incorporates them into the community and mission of the church.

On this Pentecost Sunday, we're excited to celebrate the baptisms of Koen (in our 9:30 service), and Alexi and Travis (in our 11:30 service). As we celebrate, we're reminded that the same Spirit who spoke and moved in Acts 13 is still calling people to Jesus, still transforming lives, and still building his church today.

9:30: Koen Wong

11:30: Alexi Laurencio, Travis Boyer Dasilva

Invite candidate(s) onto the stage:

- Do you believe you are a sinner in need of a Saviour? If so, say, "I do."
- Do you believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins and rode from the dead so that you could have eternal life? If so, say, "I do."
- Do you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord? If so, say, "I do."
- Do you believe in your heart that God has raised Jesus from the dead? If so, say, "I do."
- Do you renounce Satan and all his works? If so, say, "I renounce them."
- Do you intend to follow Jesus the rest of your days? If so, say, "With all my heart."
- Do you accept God's summons to join him in his mission to restore this world in a way that fits the gifts, talents, and callings he gives you? If so, say, "I do."

Testimonies