

"The wind bloweth where it listeth."

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Nothing is more observable in the book of the Acts than the sovereign action of the Spirit of God. In a general way, that book is the record of His testimony through the apostles Peter and Paul, the apostles respectively of the circumcision and the uncircumcision. But the Spirit's action is always free; thus we find Him not acting according to one defined rule, but occasionally raising up special witnesses in a very remarkable manner.

Foremost amongst these was Stephen. In his day, Peter and John were being prominently used of the Spirit in Jerusalem. They (especially Peter) had borne a bold and faithful testimony there, and had suffered not a little in consequence. We have no reason to believe that the Spirit was unable to use them for a season because of any declension in their souls; nevertheless, the fact remains that Stephen was suddenly called to the front to bear a very striking testimony to the Jewish nation. This is the more remarkable because Stephen had but lately been appointed to "serve tables." He was one of the seven set apart by the choice of the saints, and by the laying on of the apostles' hands to look after the temporal affairs of the assembly. His appointment did not extend to preaching; indeed no one in scriptural times was ever appointed to preach the Word of God. But Stephen proved in himself the truth of the word in 1 Tim. 3: 13: "They that have used the office of a deacon well, purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus"; hence we find him very soon brought into the forefront of the testimony. Truly, "the wind bloweth where it listeth" (John 3: 8). All the apostles were apparently in Jerusalem at the time, and in all probability filled with the Spirit, and so in a condition to be divinely used, yet the Spirit took a Hellenist from his diaconal work, and set him to render to Israel one of the most solemn testimonies ever rendered to that nation. In the presence of the Sanhedrim, he recounted the history of the people from the call of Abraham, and shewed conclusively their habitual resistance of the Holy Spirit. He solemnly charged home upon them their disobedience to the law, their persecution of the prophets, and their betrayal and murder of the Just One. It ended, as we know, in the utter rejection of the testimony of the Holy Spirit through him; and the faithful witness was cast out and stoned. This was Israel's way of sending a message after Christ, saying: "We will not have this man to reign over us" (Luke 19: 14). Stephen's testimony marked an epoch in the history of God's dealings with Israel, and it was the close of the first part of the disciples' commission. ("Beginning at Jerusalem" — Luke 24: 4). Why did not the Spirit of God use Peter or some other member of the apostolic band to bear so important a testimony? We cannot tell; but we learn from it the sovereignty of His action, and the freedom of His ways.

Philip's case, recorded in Acts 8 is remarkable also in its way. Samaria was to be brought under the power of the Gospel. This was a work of unusual importance, because of the peculiar position that Samaria had maintained for several centuries in relation to Jerusalem. Though a mixed race, the Samaritans professed to worship Israel's God, they revered their Scriptures, and had a temple of their own on Mount Gerizim. For all these things the Jews hated them, and had no dealings with them. Their conversion was therefore a matter of great importance and significance, yet we find the Spirit of God again passing by the twelve, and using for the blessed work another of the chosen seven. Philip preached Christ to them, and wrought miracles of healing amongst them, filling the city with joy. In the wisdom of God the Samaritan converts did not receive the Spirit until Peter and John went down (for unity's sake); but all the foundation work in their souls was wrought by the preaching of the ardent

evangelist. Who can fail to see in Philip's case, as in Stephen's, the sovereignty of the Spirit's action?

Saul, of Tarsus, comes before us next. The time had come for the unfolding of the heavenly relationships of the newly gathered church, and the counsels of God respecting it, but God did not use any of the existing twelve for the purpose, but brought upon the scene a new worker altogether, and from a most unexpected quarter. A malicious persecutor of the saints is suddenly arrested in his evil career by the revelation of a glorified Christ, and in due course made the depository of the divine thoughts and plans concerning God's assembly. And as if God would make this display of His sovereign action the more striking, though He intended Saul to play so distinguished a part, it was not an apostle that was sent to his relief during those dreary days in Damascus, but a plain disciple, of whom we never hear again. He (Ananias) imparted to him the Holy Ghost by the laying on of his hands, and forthwith baptised him. All this was done apart from Jerusalem and the twelve altogether. Truly, "the wind bloweth where it listeth!"

Further on in the book of Acts, another extraordinary worker is brought to view — Apollos (Acts 18: 24, 28). This man at first knew nothing beyond the baptism of John, but what he knew he preached diligently, enforcing all he said by Scripture. Two humble souls heard him in the synagogue at Ephesus — Aquila and Priscilla; and perceiving him to be a true soul only needing light and help, "they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly." The result was that he became a powerful preacher of the Gospel of Christ, and a great spiritual help to those who already believed through grace. Called apart from both Paul and the twelve, he seems to have pursued his path of service independently throughout: At a later date we find Paul writing to the Corinthians concerning him: "As touching our brother Apollos, I greatly desired him to come unto you with the brethren: but his will was not at all to come at this time; but he will come when he shall have convenient time." (1 Cor. 16: 12)

From all these instances, valuable lessons may be learned by all who have ears to hear. The Spirit of God is here for Christ's glory, and the blessing of men; and is sovereign and free in all His actings. Men like stereotyped forms, and would have divine blessing habitually flow through certain recognised channels; but such is not the way of God's Spirit. He uses one, and sets him aside again, for a time, or altogether as it pleases Him; He blesses a particular method on an occasion, and perhaps never reverts to it again. He is not here to exalt men or methods but Christ; would that we could all learn the lesson well.