

Sunday, May 2, 2021

# Letting Go and Moving On

(Reimagining Church Series; Message 26)  
(Where Do We Go From Here?)  
Acts 13:1-13

**Review** (Slide): We're continuing our series on Reimagining Church...

*August - focused on prayer and waiting...*

*September - focused on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit...*

*October - focused on the early church's Rule of Life: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer*

*November - focused on the Church's mission*

*January - focusing on Spirit-empowered leadership*

*February and April - focusing on the marks of a believer: a personal relationship with Jesus, being in community, a wall-break and bridge builder, a balcony person, and a pray-er...*

**Scripture:**

*<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>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." <sup>3</sup>So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.*

*<sup>4</sup>The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. <sup>5</sup>When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.*

*<sup>6</sup>They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. <sup>9</sup>Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, <sup>10</sup>"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? <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.*

*<sup>13</sup>From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem.*

## **Message:**

**In his book, *Wild at Heart* (p. 198f), John Eldredge tells a story of cliff jumping:**

*There is a river that winds its way through Southern Oregon, running down the Cascades to the coast...as a boy I spent many summer days on the Rogue, fishing and swimming and picking blackberries. I love the name given to the river by French trappers: "Scoundrel." I went rogue on the Rogue. (PIC)*

*There is a rock that juts out over the river between Morrison's Lodge and the Foster Bar. The canyon narrows there, and the Rogue deepens and pauses for a moment in its rush to the sea. High rock walls rise on either side, and on the north - the side only boaters can reach - is "Jumping Rock." The jump is high enough it takes your breath away as you plunge beneath the warmer water at the top down to where it's dark and cold - so cold it sends you back to the surface gasping for the surface and sun. Jumping Rock is perched above the river about the height of a two-story house plus some - and since something in the human brain makes it seem twice as high as you look down from the top, everything in you says, "Don't even think about it!"*

*So you don't; you can't. You just hurl yourself off out into the middle of the canyon and you free fall for what feels like enough time to recite the Gettysburg Address and then all of your senses come alive as you plunge into the cold water below.*

*And after the first jump you have to do it again, partly because you can't believe you did it once and partly because of the thrill of embracing the adventure. So after the sun warms you a bit . . . bombs away.*

*I want to live my whole life like that. I want to love with abandonment and stop waiting for others to love me first. I want to hurl myself into work worthy of God.*

The words “**obedience**” and “**change**” seem to make people shudder. “Obedience” usually requires change; few people enjoy change; many consider obedience overrated. Both are necessary to our being Church together. It’s **impossible** to be obedient if we’re unwilling to change.

Obedience and change threaten our **comfort**, interrupt our **rhythms**, challenge our **priorities**, raise our **anxiety** levels, and push our buttons about conformity.

But if we’re really committed to something or someone, we’ll be eager to change for them and do whatever they ask (obedience). Change is significant part of life and a necessary part of being Christ’s Church.

We have changes at work - changes in workload, responsibility, supervision; we even change jobs. We have changes in our family – we leave home, watch our children grow; we buy a home, update it, move; we travel/vacation in different places. We experience changes in our life-stage - school, marriage, children, empty nest, retirement, loss of spouse. Life is filled with changes.

And, no matter how hard we try, even anticipated changes often catch us **unprepared**.

**The early church has already experienced numerous **crucibles** of change; now in Acts 13, we encounter more changes. Change, change, change! Ugh!**

Webster defines change as “to make **different** in some particular” (It seems like an unfinished sentence; maybe so we can have the last word) and adds “to **transform**, to undergo a modification, to become different.”

Change can be good and **healthy**, but it is seldom easy or **pleasant**. While we long for the traditional, comfortable, and well-worn path (evidenced by the pressure to get things “back-to-normal” with this pandemic), change means taking a road less traveled down an unknown path filled with unexpected turns.

You may know the song by Eddie Espinosa: “*Change my heart, Oh God, make it ever true; Change my heart, Oh God, may I be like you. You are the potter, I am the clay; Mold me and make me, this is what I pray. Change my heart, Oh God, make it ever true; Change my heart, Oh God, may I be like you.*”

Every time I sing it, I wonder if I really want God to *mold me* into something other than what I currently am - it sounds not only uncomfortable but downright painful. If I were really like soft and pliable clay - as the song suggests - change should be easier; but I often feel more like pottery already fired in a kiln - brittle and inflexible. We might sing it robustly, but we seldom fully embrace the words we are singing.

Scripture pictures God as a potter and you and I as clay to be molded (shaped; cf. **Isaiah 29:16; 45:9**). Paul says in **Romans 9:21** - "*Does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use?*"

Putting our lives (our heart, our mind, our will, our decisions, etc.) in the hands of the eternal potter can be a **painful** and **scary** process. It requires "letting go" - that is, giving up control - and we innately believe things turn out best when we're in charge. But if we can "let go" of self and put our whole life into the Lord's hands, the end result will be **magnificent** - and worth it.

**Barnabas and Saul have been ministering in Antioch and experiencing revival.** The church is **growing**; lives are being transformed; an entire culture is being impacted by God's Spirit right before their eyes. Their worship, harmony, conversions and growth are exciting and contagious.

Suddenly God steps in and seems to **change** everything - without consulting anyone! Chances are some (many?) believers in Antioch resisted - no more change; it is simply human nature.

Paul has been dealing with **significant** change his whole life:

--On his way to Damascus to persecute Christians, he is dramatically converted to Christ; that is a radical, 180-degree transformation; he goes from seeing to being blind!

--He joins the very group of Christians he came to persecute; that is a dramatic change!

--He's sent to Arabia; then back to Damascus; then back to Jerusalem - this time to meet the disciples; then home to Tarsus where he is seemingly forgotten. Change!

--Once on the fast-track to the Sanhedrin, he is cut-off, secluded, alone. Change!

--Then Barnabas knocks at his door to enlist him into the Church's mission in Antioch. There Barnabas mentors Paul. Mentoring means [more] change!

Now, in the midst of an amazing, fruitful ministry, God changes things up again and they're moving on.

## **BEING READY**

**The Church in Antioch is a model of health and effectiveness.** The Antioch Community Church was the place to be. The growth had been incredible; the leadership was a missionary dream team: Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen, and Saul.

Each leader was called, gifted, devoted and **set apart** for the Lord's work; solid spiritual leadership in the Church is so essential. There was incredible **encouragement** - after all, Barnabas was there. The **preaching** was deep and rich - Saul and the others had the spiritual gift of teaching and prophecy.

The Antioch Church has all the marks of a healthy growing church (teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer). Many people today seem to go where their family, friends and everyone else is going; they often go to a specific church because they like the type of music, style of worship, or the charismatic preacher. They attend church. But the church is not essential to their life. Our souls need a healthy diet of truth, encouragement, deep community, and soul care that only the church can provide. We need to be the church for one another.

**The Spirit said: "Barnabas, Saul, you need to *leave Antioch and go where I send you.*"** "What?! You can't be serious! That doesn't make any sense; why split the team; why tinker with a good thing; why don't we get any say in this decision?"

We tend to think when things are going well, we must obviously be in God's will. Our wisdom figures, "*If it ain't broke...don't fix it!*" or "*If we could just get back to the way we've always done it, it would be fine.*" If we don't like it, we protest, sometimes adamantly. Notice that is not how it happened here. They understood this was a word from God and the Church *obeyed*.

Who would have imagined? Things were going well; needs were being met; souls were being saved; lives were being transformed. And God's Spirit says, "*Time for a change!*" God is, from our perspective, full of **surprises**. But only God sees the big **picture**; only God is fully aware of His eternal plan. Our focus is on the here and now.

Notice, when the Lord **spoke**, Jesus' disciples were **listening**; they heard God speak. He may have spoken to Barnabas and Saul in a night vision, while they were praying, meditating on the Scriptures, while they were fasting, or the collective wisdom and witness of God's people - or some or all of the above. They were constantly striving to discern God's will and follow it. And when they heard it, when the call came - even without advance notice, the Church changed direction and obeyed.

**The way God chooses to do ministry is often **hard** for us to get our head around.** Making decisions is quite different in the business world where owners, board members, and executives pool their wisdom, experience and research to make the best decision humanly possible. In the Church, however, decisions are made by discernment - i.e., by actively seeking God's will through Scripture, prayer, and listening to God's Spirit in our heart and as He moves through the community of believers.

In the Church, we serve a master we can't **see**, listen for a voice we often can't audibly **hear**, follow a plan we don't fully understand, deal with a myriad of different opinions and pushbacks, and have to make changes without fully knowing the implications. It is a challenge; but not an optional challenge; Jesus is the head of the Church.

Our tendency to please people (i.e., making and keeping everyone happy) is often a major **impediment** to doing God's will in the Church. (Spiritual leaders are called to assist people with what they need, i.e., not do everything they want the way they want it). Believers also face the **challenge** to clearly distinguish between their will, opinion, and agenda and God's will. We find it hard to understand God wouldn't bless our ideas.

Therein is the challenge of seeking and obeying God's will; truth is, if we're not fully devoted to God, it's **impossible**.

I'm sure members of the Antioch Church wondered why the (sudden) change. I'm sure they would prefer Barnabas and Saul stay; they were part of the "fab five." If we're convinced something is God's will, our fear of change and the challenge of obedience will dissipate.

God's call to discernment is a call to embrace the slow work of God; God's call to obedience often means a **journey**. God's call always involves **change** and always requires obedience. Both involve some **risk**. Together they **stretch** our faith.

## LETTING GO

**Letting Go (releasing) to follow (obey) God is an indication of our trust in God.** Are we willing to let go and step out in faith before all our **questions** are answered? Are we willing to let go of **control** and micro-managing, and allow the Spirit to work in and through others? Can we let go before all our ducks are in a row? Are we willing to **listen** for God's voice in his Word, in prayer, from His Spirit, thru others? Are we willing to set aside our **agenda** and risk change? Are we willing to be obedient even before we know what God is calling us to?

The story is told of a man walking along who falls off a cliff. Fortunately, he grabs a branch fifteen to twenty feet over the cliff – the valley still hundreds of feet below. Calling for help at the top of his lungs, a giant angel comes by - a power creature with huge biceps and a fifteen-foot wingspan. He hears the calls for help and looks over the cliff: "How can I help you? "Please get me back to the top before I fall."

"Do you think I can?" The man looked at the angel's huge biceps and his large wingspan: "Yes, I think you can!"

“Do you think I want to?” Man looks into his kind face: “Yes, I think you want to!” “Then,” the angel said, “let go.” (Would you trust him enough to let go?)

We innately know that maintaining the **status quo** - keeping it comfortable, doing what most people want - minimizes risk taking, requires less change and seems a lot easier. What will it take for us as Christ’s Church to set our agendas aside, seek God’s will with all our heart, and commit to be obedient regardless of what others think or what’s comfortable and easy, and step out in faith?

**Back to Antioch, notice the Church’s response to this significant change.**

Luke writes, “*When they had fasted and **prayed** and laid their hands on them, they sent them away*” (13:3). How uncommon. How refreshing. How commendable. No suspicions raised; no challenges made; no clinging to the way it was.

They had sought to discern God’s will (*fasting and prayer*). They were convinced of God’s leading and released Barnabas and Saul so they could be obedient. When Barnabas and Saul heard the community’s discernment, they “**jumped!**”

Notice how the believers trust their leaders to **listen** for and to **discern** God’s will; the leaders’ discernment becomes the community’s discernment; the community’s discernment is the leader’s discernment - and no one questions or protests God’s leading.

The early church understands it’s not about them; the mission isn’t their mission. It is all about God; it is all about His Mission. Luke writes, - “*Sent on their way by the Holy Spirit (one can say that after a discernment process), they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus*” (13:3).

More change - from home mission to world missions; from one language to another, from land to sea; from present safety to a dicey future. In Pisidian Antioch (Asia Minor), they were run out of town; in Lystra, Saul was stoned and left for dead; sea travel was dangerous; walking hard and arduous.

Why would they leave the safety of Antioch for that? Because **God called**. Because they were convinced they were following God’s will. They changed everything for the **sake** of **obedience**. Serving in the center of God’s will is always risky and often dangerous.

## **STAYING PLIABLE**

**If we become hard and brittle to God’s leading, we become less useable to him, so keeping the clay of our will (life) **pliable** requires constant attention (i.e., how do we stay pliable in the hands of God?) (Five things:)**

First, we need to **remove** all self-imposed **limitations** so we can stay open to what God may have for us. I doubt anyone - even Barnabas and Saul - would have thought God would pull them out of a growing ministry and send them on the "road." It is so like God to surprise us; mix things up; don't say "I'll never serve as an elder or deacon, be a small group leader or go on a mission trip." It's not about our agenda, our opinion, or our will. It's about "*going, growing, and blessing*", it is about being open to God so we can be obedient.

Second, we need **slow down** so we can hear God when he speaks. Notice God speaks to them while they were worshipping, while they were focused on God. We're often so busy we don't hear God speaking; if we can't hear God speak, we can't know his will and we can't be obedient (maybe that's why we stay so busy; maybe that is why we always seem to be in a hurry). We need to consistently carve out time in our day to be still and alone with God so we can hear his still small voice and discern his will.

Third, we need to let God be **God**. He called Barnabas and Saul, not Simeon, Lucius, or Manaen; he is sovereign; it is his prerogative to will his way. We need to stop trying to direct, micro-manage everything like it depends on us. God has a plan; He has reasons for why he does what he does; sometimes we're "in;" sometimes we're "out" - he is Lord! It's okay. He's the potter; we're the clay.

Fourth, we need to be ready to say "**yes**" when God asks. God seldom allows us to have all the details or to see the big picture from his perspective; he invites us on a need-to-know basis: "*Go, and I'll let you know where, when and what you need to know.*"

Obedience and change are always hard; they always require leaving something behind; they always involve an uphill road; they always include some rocky stretches. We can't say, "No" and "Lord" in the same sentence; if we say "yes" and trust God to let go and move on, he'll take care of the rest and bless us.

Fifth, we must stop **comparing** ourselves to our fellow believers and other church communities. Don't feel guilty because you weren't a missionary in Africa; if God didn't call you there, you weren't supposed to go; we're to go [only] where he calls us.

He created me to be me and you to be you and us to be us. He'll call you to use the talents, time, treasures and testimony he has given to you - and will only hold you accountable for what he entrusted to you and called you to do. And even then, grace abounds!

**Is your heart soft and pliable? Is it ready to be **molded** and **shaped** by the potter?**



If you're **walking close** to God, you'll know what he is asking you to do. It may seem to be unreasonable and outside our comfort zone, but you know. Some of your friends may even tell you it makes no sense, and they wouldn't do it. But you know. His leading is clear. You just need to say "yes," take the risk, and step out in faith.

See the water below. It is quite a drop. But take a deep **breath**; now **jump!** "Hurl yourself into work worthy of God." Enjoy the adventure of being obedient . . . and then do it **again** and again and again.

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