

# BaptistWay Bible Series for April 29: Risk following God's leadership

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## Risk following God's leadership

- Acts 13:1-6, 13-16, 42-52; 14:19-22

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The church in Jerusalem, constantly facing the ire and hostility of Judaism, found it difficult to function because of fear and intimidation. The leadership of the Jews was counter to Christianity, rejecting Christ as the prophesied Messiah and decrying what they perceived as heresy and blasphemy. The Roman government, especially Herod, who had James, the brother of John, killed and Peter imprisoned, persecuted those who experienced Pentecost (Acts 12:1-5).

Those who were scattered to the hinter regions of the Gentiles found a more receptive environment. However, both cultures created severe and significant personal risks for those who adhered to the Christian faith.

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The contemporary church has become a master at risk management. Human nature prefers to avoid pain and enjoy pleasure. Risk, for whatever cause, creates stress, inconvenience and danger of loss.

The freedom and prosperity of the American environment provides the church great opportunity for both success and apathy. Constitutional protection can foster ease, contentment and a virtually risk-free political and spiritual atmosphere.

Most risk in the contemporary American church is internal rather than external. In the Acts account of the new church, the external opposition is strong and forceful. The world hated Jesus, rejected his message and miracles, mocked him, beat and bruised him unmercifully, called for his death and ultimately crucified him as an enemy of God and of the state.

The internal fears of the American congregation often stymie its missional thrust, while in Acts, fear of external persecution strengthened the missional work of the church.

The American secular world considers the church irrelevant, frivolous, weak, incapacitated, unlearned, superstitious and hypocritical—assigning the church to a position of limited importance. The inward stress of denominational infighting, boring sermons and services, ineptness in ministry, selfishness and arrogance, pettiness and sluggishness, dishonesty and sensationalism detract from the church's mission and purpose, leaving behind an unsaved community that shakes its head in disdain, ridicule and

disgust.

Christianity often is watered down to institutional dehydration and moral flabbiness. Committee decisions and congregational apathy frequently will decide not to risk the institution for Christ's sake and rationalize itself right out the back door of spiritual strength.

While the American church enjoys its comfort, Christians in Zimbabwe are being persecuted by their dictator-led government, Christians in Nigeria have their churches burned by Islamic militants under sharia law, Christians in Iraq are attacked as infidels, and Christians in China are forced underground to avoid imprisonment by communist officials. Though this kind of external threat, rejection and persecution does not need to be sought, such stress often strengthens the church. On the other hand, in an environment of acceptance, the church becomes anemic and incapacitated.

Since there is little external risk, the church in America should act with eager opportunistic fervor. We should work while it is day for the night will come when no man will work.

The missional church seeks to come to the rescue and re-establish the qualities and character of a genuine faith that takes Jesus and his gospel seriously. Faith is not faith unless it incorporates risk. When all the risk is gone, or pushed to the side, there is nothing left to manage but empty buildings, self-indulgent rituals and the shallow hearts of impoverished saints who go to church for their own selfish enjoyment.

### **The risk makers (Acts 13:1-3)**

Antioch had produced a large congregation of believers who flourished, gained reputation, were known in the gates, made a name for themselves and who had become the spiritual phenomenon of the city.

They might have become apathetic and lazy, prideful of their numbers, exultant over their success. Becoming content and satisfied, they might have reasoned, "There are plenty of lost people here in Antioch, why should we go further?" Not so! God's Spirit was driving them outward, further and further beyond themselves to new vistas of missions and evangelism.

The words of Christ, the resurrected Savior (Acts 1:8), must have been a directive in Antioch. Antioch would not become the dead sea of the spiritual river of life but rather break forth as another spring to dispense living water.

Please do not skip too quickly over the powerful fellowship of believers at Antioch, who help prepare and equip Barnabas and Saul. The church at Antioch listened to its leadership, nurtured its membership, was faithful in its stewardship and understood its partnership with the Holy Spirit. This kind of church resources and encourages its risk takers.

In leadership in Antioch were "prophets and teachers" identified as Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen and Saul (v. 1). Up to now, Peter had been the key leader for the Lord. Transition takes place and Saul, converted on the Damascus road, mentored by Barnabas, assumes the primary position for the bold mission thrust to the Asian and European people, the Gentiles.

After months of training, testing skills, evaluating commitment and proving spiritual gifts in the new church at Antioch, the Holy Spirit, the empowering force of the apostles' life and ministry, makes his wishes very clear.

This revelation and inspiration came out of an intense time of congregational worship and fasting (v. 2). This word from the Spirit seems to come to the congregation but may have come to the prophets and teachers who would have known the calling and commitment of Barnabas

and Saul. These two outstanding men distinguished themselves as leaders, being the most capable and committed to the work to which they were called. The church was willing to send off its very best to do the work of ministry.

The first missionaries were flushed out from Jerusalem like quail fleeing for cover, dispersed out into the other regions beyond. Antioch, however, would send out missionaries on the authority of God's Spirit, driven with aggression in obedience to God's command. God, by his Spirit, named as the first missionaries, Barnabas and Saul (v. 2). The church at Antioch became the catalyst for the first missionary journey of Saul.

With the encouragement of Barnabas, Saul, at one time the most unlikely candidate, was set aside for the work to which he had been called (v. 2). These two already had proven themselves and their calling moved forward, sanctioned with the laying on of hands by the church (13:3), and by the voice of the Holy Spirit. The laying on of hands and setting apart was probably not an ordination according to today's concepts but more like a recognition of their calling and skills.

The church had great leadership called of God, powerful worship services, excited believers, unified fellowship, an accepting culture, a studious constituency, and a common purpose directed by the Holy Spirit. The hand of God used all of these things to override the risk and danger in order for the gospel to be preached.

### **The risk takers (Acts 13:3-6)**

The road to revolution, from Antioch to the uttermost parts of the world, lay ahead like a turnpike filled with detours, obstacles, road blocks and human frailties. Notwithstanding, the starting flag comes down and the first missionary journey, under the commission of a church, had begun.

Barnabas and Saul, risk-takers for the Lord, are set aside for the task.

### **Taking risks in Cyprus**

With a powerful worship service of fasting, prayer and blessing (v. 3), they were “sent on their way by the Holy Spirit” (v. 4), walked down to the seaport of Seleucia, boarded a ship and set sail for Cyprus, the birthplace of Barnabas.

Traveling “through the whole island” (v. 6), they proclaimed the word of God. John Mark went with them as their attendant, helper, servant—doing whatever he could to free-up Barnabas and Saul to preach (v. 5).

The two cities mentioned were Salamis and Paphos. In the city of Paphos, three experiences are recounted: The sorcerer Elymas opposed them and was confronted and struck blind; from here on out, Luke calls Saul by his Gentile name, Paul, to identify with his Gentile ministry; and Sergius Paulus, the Proconsul, was converted (vv. 6-12). Paul and Barnabas have their first Gentile convert on the first missionary journey. There may have been others but Sergius Paulus was a prominent, notable government leader who believed the truth of the resurrected Christ. Paul and Barnabas found satisfaction in risking it all for Christ sake.

These risk-takers give us a typical pattern of successful witnessing: Be filled with the Holy Spirit, face opposition fearlessly, depend upon God’s power, believe God for the victory, teach God’s word clearly and expect a response.

### **Hostility with a turning point**

The adversity and risk intensified. Traveling north and west to Asia, the

three missionaries arrived in Perga, where John Mark left to return to Jerusalem. Acts 15:38 implies John Mark's leaving was a kind of defection that did not set well with Paul.

Staying briefly, the two moved on to Pisidian Antioch where Paul preached his first recorded sermon in the synagogue to a mixture of Jews and Gentiles.

This Antioch was more problematic and challenging. The sermon and its consequences were critical. The Jews responded with abusiveness and jealousy (vv. 45, 50) while the Gentiles "were glad and honored the word of the Lord" (vv. 48-49).

What happens now is a turning point. Luke records, "we now turn to the Gentiles" (v. 46) in order to "bring salvation to the ends of the earth" (v. 47).

Some of Paul's greatest lessons were learned in difficult times. His calling becomes more clear as he confronted the closed minds of his own people. Not unlike Jesus, Paul found it difficult to preach when rejected and faith in Christ is refused.

The Antioch mood was fervent and they followed Paul to Iconium (14:19-20) where their arguments were convincing and Paul was stoned, dragged outside the city and left for dead. Paul had watched Stephen stoned to death and now had to endure the same affliction for his beliefs and preaching.

His sermon in Antioch was patterned after Stephen's in Jerusalem—a message that Christ was the fulfillment of prophecy and the Jesus they crucified was raised from the dead (13:26-37). Paul's fate was the same, except that he lived. Paul lived to continue his ministry (14:20-28) and was not deterred from the risk he was taking, for he had a commission from the Lord as directed by the Holy Spirit.

## **Summary**

Taking risk always is a challenge. Luke pulls no punches in showing Christians the Holy Spirit is the inspiration and motivation in the fulfillment of one's calling. The missional church is a risk-taking congregation made up of individuals led by the Holy Spirit to risk their lives, talent, money and time for the purpose of God's kingdom.

This may seem surreal to many, but God calls us all to be faithful, and the salvation of people is the supreme value of the believer who truly worships God. Risk is that land between responsibility and success where the task assumed is worth the peril and danger. God has called us to a task that cannot be achieved by people caught up in their own safety, convenience, selfishness and apathy. Christ is looking for risk-makers and risk-takers to do the work of evangelism and missions.

## **Discussion question**

- When is the last time you or your church took what appeared to be a risk in order to follow God's leadership?